

The Relationship among anxiety, depression, and family functioning in adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

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Introduction

- Adolescents with ASD have high rates of anxiety and depression (internalizing symptoms)¹
- In the general population, internalizing symptoms in youths affect family functioning²
- Findings are limited and more mixed in ASD literature³



Methods

- N = 69 adolescents (ages 11-18)
- Hierarchical linear regression of the effects of adolescent internalizing symptoms on parent ratings of family functioning
- Correlational analysis of the relationship between teen report and parent report of internalizing symptoms

Results

Predictor Variable and Measure	R ²	ΔR ²	p
IQ (Stanford-Binet 5)	0.847	n/a	n/a
Externalizing Behavior (BASC-2-Parent)	0.872	0.025	0.0003
Internalizing Symptoms (MASC-2 and CDI-2:SR[S])	0.885	0.013	0.0261

- **Internalizing symptoms predict family functioning over and above IQ and externalizing symptoms**
- **Depression significantly predicts more positive family functioning**

Predictor Variable and Measure	B	p
IQ (Stanford-Binet V)	-0.025	0.828
Externalizing Behavior (BASC-2-Parent)	0.308	0.010
Anxiety (MASC-2)	0.048	0.336
Depression (CDI-2:SR[S])	-0.374	0.003

- **Parents and teens report similarly on measures of teen's depression, but not anxiety**

Discussion

- The association between greater depression and more positive family functioning has several possible explanations, such as:
 - Parents may feel relieved by signs of depression, which could be regarded as a "normal" part of adolescence
 - Depression may mitigate externalizing behaviors, reducing family stress
 - Scores on depression rating scales may have limited validity in this population, given the overlap in symptoms of ASD and depression
- Anxiety in ASD may not be well-captured by existing standardized measures

Future Directions

- Evaluate other variables (e.g., parent mental health)
- Broaden evaluation to larger family system relationships (e.g., sibling, spouse)
- Extend the sample (i.e., size, age range, cognitive functioning)

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