

The Correlation between Childhood Victimization and the Development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in People with Autism Spectrum Disorder



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Statement of Problem

Individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often experience behavioral and social challenges that persist throughout their lifespan. Without the support of family, educators, clinicians, and peers, children with ASD are potentially at risk for life-long victimization and the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Introduction

- ❖ ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that can be diagnosed as early as within the first two or three years of life.
- ❖ Areas of child development that are affected can include impaired communication, lack of social awareness, and repetitive behaviors (APA, 2013).
- ❖ These symptoms can have a tremendously negative impact on the ability of children with ASD to meet their developmental milestones which can result in challenges throughout their lives.

Hypothesis

- ❖ Children with ASD experience behavioral and social challenges that place them at a higher risk than typically developing children for life-long victimization which can result in the development of PTSD.
- ❖ Intervention programs embedded into the school curriculum and carried out by the family, educators, clinicians, and peers will promote a healthy and safe learning environment for children diagnosed with ASD.

Key Terms

- ❖ **Autism spectrum disorder** – People with ASD often experience challenges with their social interactions compared to those who are typically developing (APA, 2013). They also may have difficulty engaging in reciprocal communication and making eye-contact with others (APA, 2013).
- ❖ **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder** – The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) criteria that define posttraumatic stress disorder includes: a stressor that results in intrusive symptoms, avoidance, negative cognitions and mood due to a traumatic experience, as well as, changes in arousal and reactivity. These symptoms last for at least one month.
- ❖ **Victimization** – treating an individual cruelly and unjustly. Victimization may be psychological, emotional, physical, and/or sexual.

Current Research

- ❖ Brenner, Pan, Mazefsky, Smith, and Gabriels (2018) conducted an experiment examining the effects of physical, sexual, and emotional trauma on individuals diagnosed with ASD. Findings from this study indicated that people with ASD experienced more externalizing symptoms indicative of PTSD. However, it was difficult to differentiate the diagnosis due to an overlap of ASD and PTSD symptoms. Increased trauma screening methods for those with ASD were encouraged.
- ❖ Klintwall, Eldevik, and Eikeset (2015), completed a data analysis on the efficacy of Early and Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI). Results of their analysis found that children with ASD that received EIBI acquired skills at a faster rate, improving their developmental trajectories compared to those who did not receive treatment.
- ❖ Mehtar and Mukaddes (2011) studied the prevalence of PTSD in children and adolescents with ASD who experienced or witnessed victimization. The results of this study indicated that females with ASD experienced more traumatic symptoms than males with ASD. It should be noted that both males and females experienced traumatic symptoms.
- ❖ Roberts, Koenen, Lyall, Robinson, and Weisskopf (2015), conducted research that examined how individuals with ASD were at significant risk for victimization from their peers. The study found an increased susceptibility for people with ASD to develop PTSD. The research also found that women with more severe ASD were more than one and a half times likely to experience sexual abuse than females with fewer ASD symptoms.

Proposed Interventions

- ❖ Increase the nationwide funding of early intervention programs to assist with the social and behavioral needs of young children.
- ❖ Implement a protocol for collaboration between the child's pediatrician and early intervention team to promote continuity of care.
- ❖ When children with special needs turn three, ensure the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meets the child's educational, social, and emotional needs by involving relevant team members in formulating the plan.
- ❖ Utilize behavioral health specialists for individuals with ASD who either need more intensive support, or need extra assistance with their activities of daily living.
- ❖ Promote autism awareness and understanding by developing programs in the school system to educate typically developing children.
- ❖ Implement mental health programs at no cost to families for children with special needs. These programs should include individual and group therapy for children with ASD and their families that is delivered by professionals who are familiar with ASD and the potential stressors the family system may encounter.
- ❖ Provide college, vocational training, and assisted living programs that promote independence. Design programs that are based upon the level of severity an individual with ASD experiences.
- ❖ Encourage socialization and developing positive and healthy relationships with others. Create different activities based upon the interest of the participants.

DID YOU KNOW?

People on the autism spectrum are especially vulnerable to bullying



Nearly two-thirds have been bullied

