Parent and Professional Evaluations of Family Stress Associated with Characteristics of Autism

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This study assessed the impact of various individual symptoms of autism on mothers and fathers, and professionals' accuracy in estimating parents' perceived stress levels. Mothers and fathers of 20 autistic children, and 20 therapists working with those children, independently rated the severity of common symptoms of autism in their child, and how stressful they found each symptom; therapists estimated parental stress. The autistic child's language and cognitive impairment were judged by all raters as most severe and stressful. In contrast with other studies, individual parents agreed on both symptom severity and degree of stress. Parents of older children judged symptom severity to be lower, but fathers reported a continued high level of stress. Professionals judged families as more stressed by the child symptoms than did families themselves. Implications for intervention and casework are discussed.

The raising of autistic and other handicapped children in a family environment has been documented to contribute additionally to the stresses of family functioning in a variety of ways. This study examines which individual
symptoms of autism parents find most stressful, and to assess the professionals' accuracy in estimating parental levels of stress.

In the literature on various handicapping conditions, the degree of impact on the family has been related to factors such as sleep patterns, bowel/bladder problems, stereotypic behaviors, self-injury, and aggression (Blacher, 1984). The added stress often results from the increased caretaking demands due to these difficulties. In this context, stress represents a negative influence on intra- and extrafamilial relationships, family recreation, finances, and the physical, emotional, and mental health of parents (Blacher, 1984; DeMyer & Goldberg, 1983), necessitating a change in life-style.

Studies by Holroyd (Holroyd, Brown, Winkler, & Simmons, 1975; Holroyd & McArthur, 1976) and by Bristol and Schopler (1983, 1984) have suggested that parenting autistic children may be associated both with additional stressors and with a characteristic pattern of stress. In Holroyd and McArthur's (1976) study, mothers of autistic children reported greater interference with normal personal and family functioning than did mothers of Down's syndrome children or parents of an outpatient psychiatric group. This was linked to more upset and disappointment about the child, more personality and behavioral problems, and fewer activities and vocational possibilities.

Bristol and Schopler (1984) reported several distinctive stress patterns with families of autistic children. In Bristol's (1979) dissertation, she reported that mothers found older children (e.g., adolescents) somewhat more stressful than younger, a finding supported by DeMyer and Goldberg (1983). Autistic boys were also associated with greater stress than girls; as with severely retarded children, this may be due in part to greater size and management difficulty. Although family stress was not predictable from factors such as number of children, maternal employment status, or the child's IQ, it was associated with child characteristics "amenable to intervention" (Bristol & Schopler, 1984), such as behavioral difficulties and the need for assistance in self-help, as well as the availability of social supports and prospects for the child's living independently. While these general child characteristics have been identified, as yet little is known about the symptoms of autistic children that are difficult for families on a day-to-day basis. One purpose of the present study is to identify some of these component stressors.

Several studies have examined parents' overall assessments of their children's development level or symptomatology compared to professionals' assessments. Schopler and Reichler (1972) found that parents of mildly psychotic children were relatively poorer estimators of the child's developmental level than were parents of more severely psychotic children, perhaps owing to greater uncertainty associated with the milder cases. Konstantareas (1985) reported that parents of young autistic children generally tend to un-