Chapter 9

Parenting in Dyads With an ASD–Child: An Overview of the Challenges and Intervention Perspectives Through Attachment Theoretical Framework

Giulia Perasso

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3265-3869
University of Pavia, Italy

Nava R. Silton
Marymount Manhattan College, USA

Jacopo De Angelis
University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the complex experience of parenting children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) from an attachment-based perspective. The role of parental sensitivity, intrusiveness, and self-efficacy will be discussed in detail. These parental characteristics were indeed found to positively affect the parent-ASD-child bond and, in turn, to modulate the developmental course of ASDs. Likewise, the nature of symptomatology pertaining to autism (i.e., strong impairment in social and communication skills) represents an obstacle for parents to effectively attune to their children’s needs or emotions. A number of interventions aimed at improving the quality and the attunement level in the parent-ASD-child dyad are presented. A specific focus is dedicated to attachment-based interventions such as the video feedback intervention to promote positive parenting – AUTI (VIPP-AUTI).

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INTRODUCTION

Caring for a child with a disability can be very stressful, but it can also be an opportunity to discover new psychological resources that can be useful for the situation. One of the main challenges of parenting a child with a disability is to seek behavioral and emotional strategies to effectively meet the child’s emotional needs. This process proves even more difficult in families with a child with autism since social communication impairments associated with autism represent a more complex obstacle to overcome for parents. However, research is providing families with new intervention perspectives to facilitate everyday life interactions.

The present chapter intends to show the complexity of parenting a child with ASD and to review some of the interventions that are designed to improve the quality of parent-ASD-child interactions. Specifically, it will be structured in the following manner. The first paragraph will provide a brief overview of Autism Spectrum Disorders by reporting diagnostic criteria, prevalence data, and debates on their etiology. The second paragraph will focus on the principal challenges of parenting children with ASD through the lens of a theoretical attachment perspective (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Three constructs will be analyzed in detail: parental sensitivity, parental intrusiveness, and parental self-efficacy. The third paragraph will review the main interventions targeted at improving the quality of parent-ASD-child interactions by boosting parental competencies and reducing parental intrusiveness. The chapter will also focus on the Video Feedback Intervention to Promote Positive Parenting – AUTI (VIPP-AUTI; Poslawsky, Naber, Bakermans-Kranenburg, De Jonge, Van Engeland, Van IJzendoorn, 2014). Finally, clinical and experimental limitations, as well as future directions of research in this field, will be discussed. Therefore, the current chapter is targeted at examining the parent-ASD-child dyad’s bonding in light of recent intervention perspectives.

AN OVERVIEW OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Diagnostic Features and Epidemiology

Autism Spectrum Disorders constitute a multi-faceted and pervasive neurodevelopmental syndrome characterized by both social and non-social impairments. Specifically, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) focuses on impairments in social interaction and communication, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, or activities as key criteria for ASD diagnoses (APA, 2013). The severity of the disorder varies as a function of the general cognitive profile and the behavior of the individual. Accordingly, there are
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