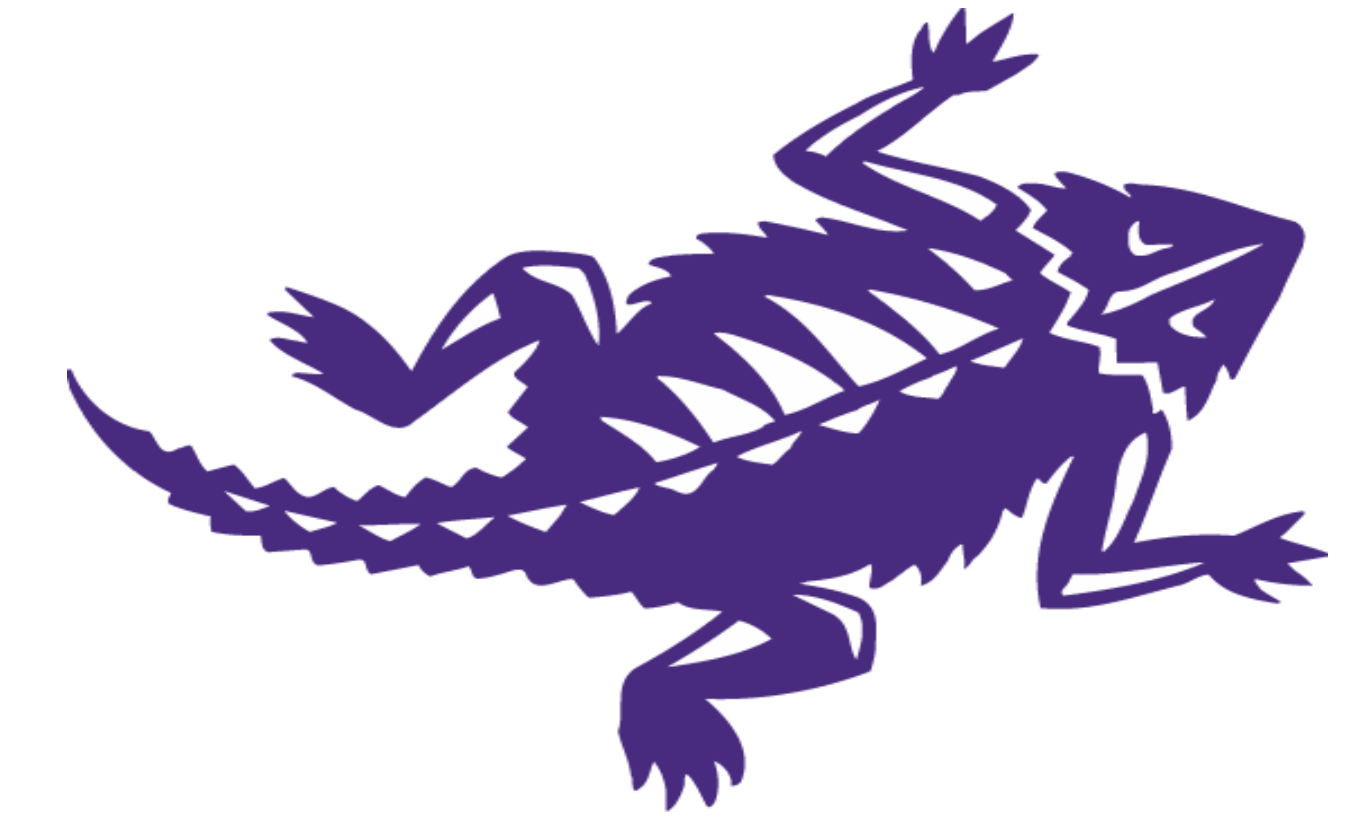




# Discrepancies in Ratings of Child Behavior Between Mothers and Fathers of Autistic Children



Sarah Madison<sup>1</sup>, Naomi Ekas<sup>1</sup>, Chrystyna Kouros<sup>2</sup>

Texas Christian University<sup>1</sup> & Southern Methodist University<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that causes deficits in reciprocal social communication and restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, and activities (APA, 2013). Previous work has found disagreement between parents in their perception of characteristics of their child (Duhig et al., 2000). These differences in perception have been termed ‘informant discrepancies’ and are linked, in neurotypical (NT) families, to phenomena within the family system such as maternal depression (Christensen et al., 1992). Previous work with NT and ADHD children also found that mothers rated their child’s symptoms as more severe than fathers did (Christensen et al., 1992; Langberg et al., 2010). There is, however, a paucity of research examining possible discrepancies between parents of autistic children (Stratis & Lecavalier, 2015). Parents of autistic children may differ from parents of NT children and consequently, research utilizing parents of NT children may not generalize to parents of autistic children.

The current study examined patterns of discrepancies in parents’ perception of their autistic child’s internalizing and externalizing behaviors. I measured the rate at which parents agree about their child’s internalizing and externalizing behaviors and determined which parent perceived behaviors as more severe when parents disagreed. Lastly, I determined whether discrepancies in parent perception of child behavior predicted depressive symptoms for either parent.

## Method

### Participants

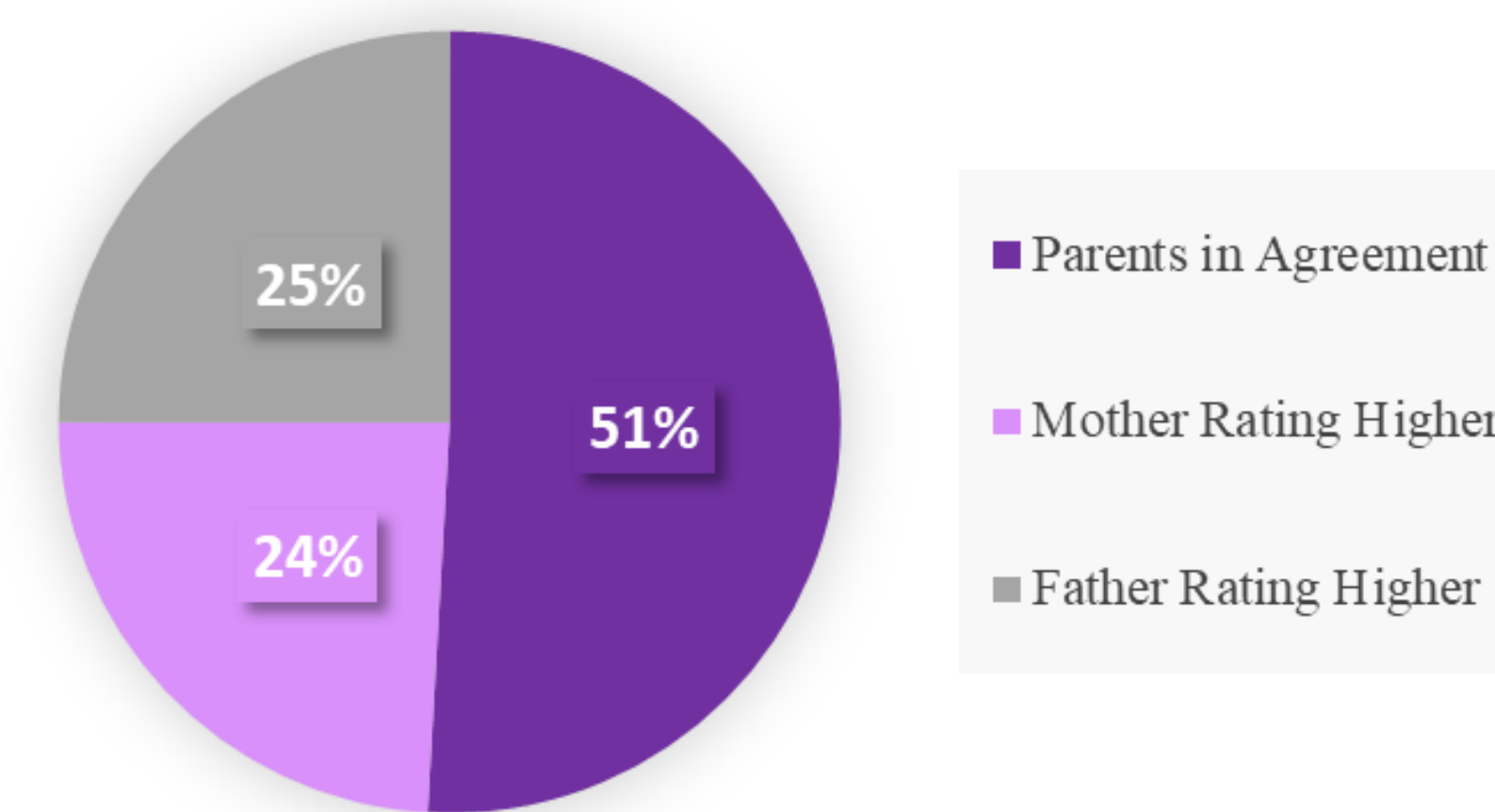
Mothers and fathers of autistic children between the age of 10 and 17 years old were included in the study. To qualify, parents had to be married or living together for one year, have an autistic child that lived with them 50% of the time, and be able to read and speak English. A total of 116 couples were included in analyses. Couples were surveyed about their own depressive symptoms and their perceptions of their child’s internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

### Measures

- The Inventory of Anxiety and Depression Symptoms (IDAS; Watson et al., 2007) depression subscale was used to measure parent depressive symptoms.
- The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL, Achenbach, 1999) was used to measure parent perception of their child’s internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

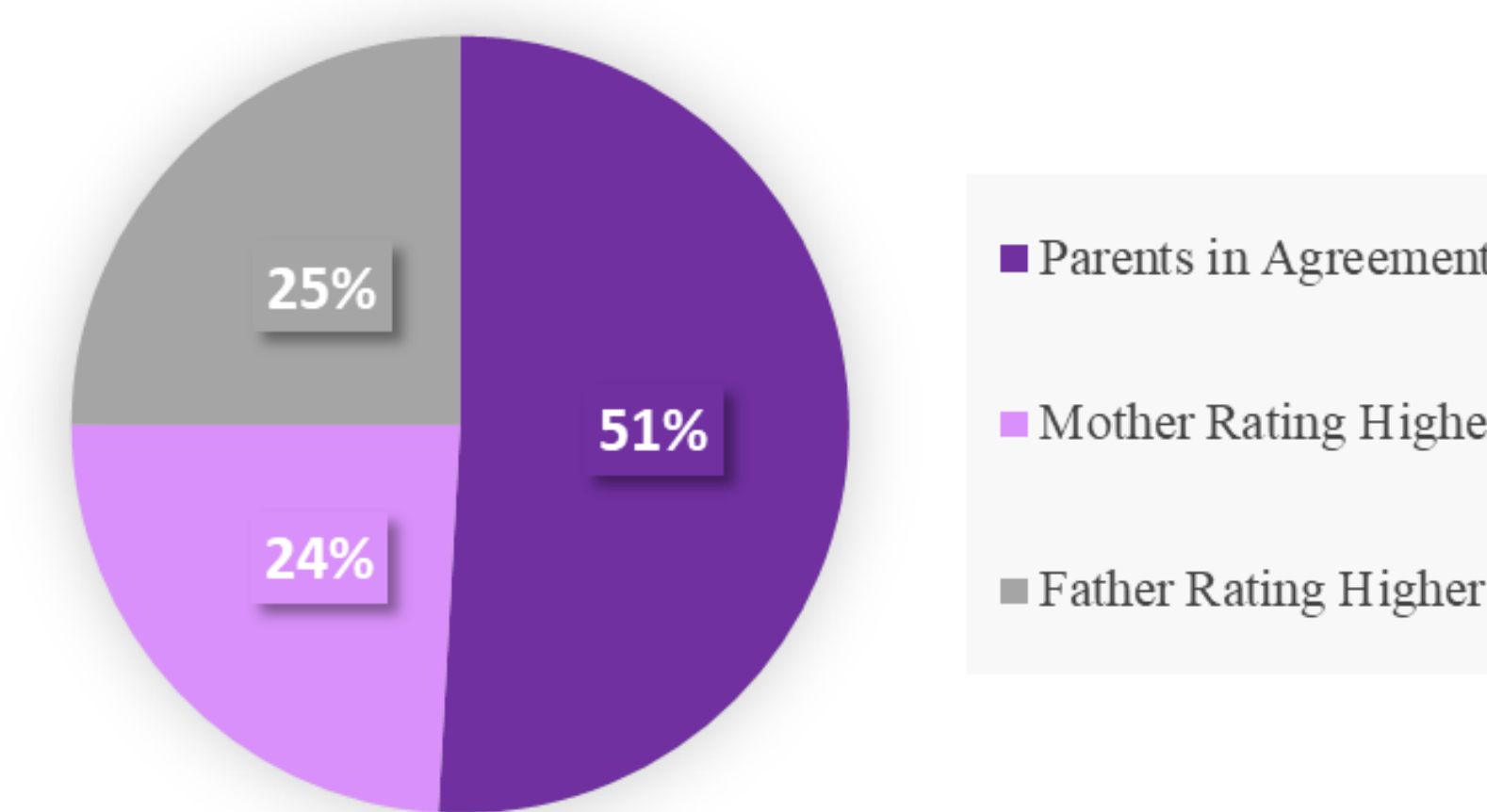
## Results

Discrepancies in Parent Rating of Internalizing Behavior



Parents agreed about their child’s internalizing behavior about half the time. When parents did disagree, there were about equal instances of mother rating behavior higher as father rating behavior higher.

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| Predictor                          | Outcome | F     | df       | p    | R <sup>2</sup> |
|------------------------------------|---------|-------|----------|------|----------------|
| <b>Internalizing Behaviors</b>     |         |       |          |      |                |
| Mother Depressive Symptoms**       |         | 3.232 | (5, 115) | .009 | .128           |
| Father Depressive Symptoms*        |         | 2.389 | (5, 115) | .042 | .098           |
| Mother Relationship Satisfaction   |         | .983  | (5, 115) | .431 | .043           |
| Father Relationship Satisfaction   |         | 1.347 | (5, 114) | .250 | .058           |
| Family Cohesion                    |         | .928  | (5, 109) | .466 | .043           |
| <b>Externalizing Behaviors</b>     |         |       |          |      |                |
| Mother Depressive Symptoms**       |         | 3.452 | (5, 115) | .006 | .136           |
| Father Depressive Symptoms*        |         | 2.315 | (5, 115) | .048 | .095           |
| Mother Relationship Satisfaction   |         | 1.975 | (5, 115) | .088 | .082           |
| Father Relationship Satisfaction** |         | 3.490 | (5, 114) | .006 | .138           |
| Family Cohesion                    |         | .930  | (5, 109) | .465 | .043           |

Note. Bold denotes a significant model. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ;

Polynomial regression analyses showed that discrepancies in perception of both the child’s internalizing and externalizing behaviors related to parent depressive symptoms for both mothers and fathers of autistic children.

## Discussion

Previous research with parents of NT and ADHD children found that mothers tend to rate their child’s behavior as more severe than fathers (Christensen et al., 1992; Langberg et al., 2010). The current study using parents of autistic children, however, found that fathers rated their child’s behavior as more severe at equal rates as mothers did for both ratings of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. It is possible that, because autistic children require more care, support, and medical attention, parents of autistic children discuss and attend to their child’s behavior more than parents of NT children, resulting in greater agreement between parents regarding behavior. It is also possible that parents of autistic children share childcare responsibilities more equally than parents of NT children because of the increased amount of care associated with symptoms of autism. This could also explain greater agreement among parents of autistic children.

Previous research has linked discrepancies in perception of the child to maternal depression (Christensen et al., 1992). The current study supports this finding and suggests that this may extend to fathers as well. There is a lack of inclusion of fathers in autism and family research. Consequently, it is important to include fathers in family and autism research and to explore similarities and differences between parents.

The current study found that discrepancies in perception of autistic child’s internalizing and externalizing behaviors related to parent depressive symptoms for mothers and fathers. Consequently, it is possible that therapy interventions addressing disagreement about the child may benefit parents’ mental health.

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Correspondence concerning this poster should be addressed to Sarah Madison at Texas Christian University via e-mail: sarah.madison@tcu.edu