

Study details autism's heavy toll beyond childhood on marriages

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The parents of grown children with autism are more likely to divorce than couples with typically developing children, according to new data from a large longitudinal study of families of adolescents and adults with autism.

The study, published in the August issue of the *Journal of Family Psychology* by researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Waisman Center, paints a new picture of the prospects of long-term marital success for parents raising a child with autism.

The study is the first to track marital history of parents of adult children with autism. It reveals that, in contrast to previous assumptions, parents do not have a greater risk of divorce when their son or daughter with autism is young. However, as the child with autism grows into adolescence and adulthood, parents are more likely to divorce than are parents of typically developing children.

Although findings reveal diminished prospects for a lasting marriage for parents raising a child with autism, the majority of marriages in this study survived.

The study compared the marital fates of 391 couples — the parents of adolescent and adult children with autism — to a sample drawn from another large [longitudinal study](#), the National Survey of Midlife in the United States (MIDUS). The goal of the study was to document the rate and timing of divorce of parents of children with autism, explains Sigan Hartley, a UW-Madison assistant professor of human development and family studies and lead author of the report.

The study revealed that the divorce rate for parents of children with autism mirrors the divorce rate of the parents of children without disabilities until the child reaches 8 years of age. After that, the divorce rate goes down for parents of children without disabilities but remains high for parents of children with autism.

"There seems to be a prolonged vulnerability for divorce in parents of children with autism," says Hartley. "Typically, if couples can survive the early child-rearing years, parenting demands decrease and there is often less strain on the marriage. However, parents of children with autism often continue to live with and experience high parenting demands into their child's [adulthood](#), and thus marital strain may remain high in these later years."

Autism, also known as autism spectrum disorder or ASD, has symptoms that vary considerably in severity between individuals, but core characteristics of the disorder include difficulty establishing and maintaining social relationships, delayed communication skills, and repetitive motions such as rocking back and forth and hand flapping. [Children](#) with autism frequently require high levels of care and continue to live with parents as adults.

"There is a lifelong profile of challenging behaviors and symptoms associated with autism," Hartley notes. "Few developmental disabilities appear to be more taxing on parents and there is a great need for support services for families when the child is an adolescent and adult. Providing support for couples to help them work on their marriages is an obvious step. If we can get information and support to these families, we hope to be able to support lasting marriages."

The new study compares data from two large longitudinal studies, the [Adolescents](#) and Adults with [Autism](#) Study, directed by Marsha Mailick Seltzer, a UW-Madison professor of social work and director of the Waisman Center, and MIDUS, directed by UW-Madison psychology professor Carol Ryff. Both studies are funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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