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The Relationship Between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Autism Spectrum Disorder in an Epidemiological Sample From the United States

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Introduction: Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; e.g. violence, divorce) are associated with numerous negative health outcomes. Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may be at risk for ACEs due to behavioral issues and financial/social/emotional stressors associated with their care. Yet, research on ACEs in children with ASD is limited.

Aims: Assess ACEs in youth with and without ASD.

Objectives: To assess rates and associated characteristics of ACEs in children with and without ASD in the general population.

Methods: Data on 84,352 children (ages 2-17 years; 1,608 with ASD) were drawn from the 2011-2012 National Survey of Children's Health, a nationally representative CDC survey of households with children. The survey included questions about child emotional, developmental, and behavioral problems, socio-demographics and nine ACEs (neighborhood violence, discrimination, financial stress, domestic violence and parent separation, mental illness, substance abuse, death, or incarceration).

Results: A history of multiple ACEs was reported by 34.4% of children with ASD compared with 24.4% of children without ASD. In survey-weighted logistic regression models controlling for age, sex, race, family structure and poverty, youth with ASD were 1.66 times (95% CI 1.18-2.34) more likely to have multiple ACEs compared with youth without ASD. Mediation analyses suggested that the increased rate of ACEs in ASD is driven by the greater co-occurrence of behavioral and emotional problems, but not ID, in ASD.

Conclusions: Although children with ASD experience ACEs at a higher frequency than children without ASD, this is explained by the increased co-occurrence of emotional and behavioral problems in ASD.