

# UW-Madison: Researchers gain insight into day-to-day lives of parents raising children with autism

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MADISON – Like all parents, couples who have a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) share the ups and downs of parenting.

A new study by Waisman Center researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison looks at the daily experiences of these parents to provide a more detailed picture of the strengths and vulnerabilities of couples raising a child with ASD.

“I think we can use these findings to develop more effective therapies and strategies to address potential challenges in couple relationships for parents of children with ASD,” says Sigán Hartley, lead author of the new study, published this month in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

Previous findings have shown that, on average, couples with a child with ASD have higher risks of divorce and lower satisfaction with their marriages when compared to couples with a typically developing child.

“What has been missing is research that really gets at the details of what is actually happening in the day-to-day lives of these couples,” says Hartley, a Waisman Center researcher and 100 Women Chair in Human Ecology at UW-Madison.

To fill in this gap in the research, Hartley and her colleagues examined the daily

experiences of 174 couples who have a child with ASD and 179 couples with a typically developing child.

Each couple kept separate “daily diaries” for two weeks, and recorded information like how much time they spent with their partners, how supported they felt, how close they felt to their partners, and the positive or negative interactions they had with them.

“These measures really let us understand how couple relationships are being altered for parents of children with ASD,” says Hartley.

The researchers found a combination of vulnerabilities and strengths.

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