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Compassionate Parenting as a Key to Satisfaction, Efficacy and Meaning Among Mothers of Children with Autism

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Abstract Two studies examine the role of compassionate and self-image parenting goals in the experience of mothers of children with autism. In Study 1, a comparison sample was included. Study 1 included measures of parenting goals, life satisfaction, family life satisfaction, parenting satisfaction, and meaning in life. Study 2 incorporated a measure of parenting efficacy. Study 1 showed that mothers of children with autism were higher than comparison mothers in compassionate parenting goals. In both studies, compassionate parenting predicted positive outcomes including higher parenting satisfaction (both studies), family life satisfaction, meaning in life (Study 1) and higher parenting efficacy (Study 2). These studies support the notion that compassionate parenting is a key to satisfaction for mothers of children with autism.

Keywords Autism Spectrum Disorders · Parenting goals · Compassionate goals · Self-image goals · Parenting satisfaction · Parenting efficacy

Introduction

Parents of children with autism experience significant stress (Hayes and Watson 2013; Huang et al. 2014; Milgram and Atzil 1988). Consequently, over half report experiencing symptoms of clinical depression (Cohen and Tsiouris 2006; DeLong 2004), a rate much higher than that of other parents (Garfield et al. 2014). Yet, many parents of children with autism lead satisfying and productive lives

(Faso et al. 2013; Hartley et al. 2012). A subset of these report that the experience of having a child with autism has refocused their parenting toward greater empathy and compassion, and that this transformation has led to greater meaning and personal satisfaction in their lives (Brodey 2007). These stories suggest that a motivational shift in parenting goals may be a silver lining for parents who are successfully coping with the stress of parenting a child with autism.

Thus, for the purposes of this study, I have divided parenting goals according to whether they are compassionate goals and thus focused on understanding, appreciating and meeting the unique needs of one's child, or self-image goals that are focused on how one's child reflects on oneself. This distinction is derived from work defining interpersonal goals in terms of whether they are directed toward a compassionate focus on another person's needs or toward constructing, enhancing and maintaining a desired self-image (Canevello and Crocker 2011a, b, c; Canevello et al. 2013; Crocker and Canevello 2008, 2012). Thus, compassionate parenting goals aim to gain a view of the world from the child's perspective, show the child that his or her interests and abilities are truly valued, and tailor parenting efforts in a way that recognizes the child's individual needs. In contrast, self-image parenting goals aim to shape the child's behavior in a way that will reflect positively on the parent, develop skills such that the child will compare favorably with other children and direct parenting efforts in way that brings positive recognition of the child's strengths and hides his or her weaknesses.

This approach toward defining parenting is similar to the typology proposed by Hastings and Grusec (1998), who distinguish parent-centered goals, which are likely to be self-image oriented, from child-centered goals and relationship-centered goals, which are more likely to be

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compassion oriented. However, because of the proposed central role of compassion in maintaining well-being for parents of children with autism, measuring this construct directly was important for the present study. Children with autism often show a complex array of sensory sensitivities, obsessive interests, and atypical perceptions of the world (Mash and Wolfe 2013). Because of the intensity and unusual nature of these needs, a focus on compassion allows parents to develop the insight that is needed to provide effective support as the child confronts social, cognitive and behavioral struggles. In turn, a compassionate focus will support the well-being of the parent and family by facilitating positive interactions with the child with autism.

Previous work suggests that emphasizing compassionate goals over self-image goals is adaptive for parents of children with autism. Tunali and Power (2002) report an interview study in which mothers of children with autism cognitively reappraised their parenting situations in order to cope with the uncontrollable stress associated with parenting children with autism. These mothers expressed less concern with others' opinions of their child's behavior (a self-image goal), while struggling more to understand their child (a compassionate goal) (Tunali and Power 2002). Interestingly, in this study the degree to which mothers prioritized understanding their children and spending a great deal of time with their children, both compassionate goals, predicted their self-rated life satisfaction.

Research examining the dynamics of other types of relationships provides converging evidence for the notion that adopting compassionate parenting goals will enhance the well-being and family relationships among mothers of children with autism. Canevello and Crocker's (2011c), Crocker and Canevello (2008, 2012) work reveals that those pursuing compassionate goals in their friendships report more satisfying relationships and higher levels of well-being, as compared with those pursuing self-image goals. They have observed a self-reinforcing process in which compassionate goals support a positive relationship dynamic that includes a belief that relationships grow and improve through the resolution of difficulties (Canevello and Crocker 2011a). Similarly, Wayment's work examining reactions to identifying with less fortunate others shows that those who have compassionate reaction are more likely to feel a common bond and to experience enhanced well-being, as compared with those who have self-protective or self-enhancing reactions (which are self-image concerns) (Wayment 2004, 2006; Wayment and O'Mara 2008). These general relationship processes are pertinent to the situation of parents who confront the difficulties associated with autism and the realization that their children face significant challenges. Parents who have compassionate reactions are more likely to believe that they will grow and

improve through the challenges they confront with their children, and are more likely to develop a warm bond with their children.

The literature on well being among parents generally suggests that for some, parenting can be fraught with negative emotion and stress (Doss et al. 2009; Garfield et al. 2014; Paulson and Bazemore 2010), while for others it can enhance well-being and a sense of meaning in life (Nelson et al. 2013; Nelson et al. 2014). One key factor that may shape the emotional experience of parents is the degree to which parents focus on compassionate or self-image parenting goals. Self-image goals have been found to increase anxiety and distress in roommate relationships (Crocker et al. 2010), while compassionate goals have been found to increase well-being (Crocker 2008). Crocker and Canevello (2011) describe the ways that caregivers can enhance their own well-being by compassionately focusing on the needs of their care recipients or increase their distress by focusing on their own needs. In a similar fashion, parents who appreciate the perspectives of their unique children are likely to experience more moments of joy and satisfaction, while those focused on their self-image will likely experience more anxiety and disappointment. These effects may be even more pronounced for parents of children with autism, because such children often take more effort and patience to understand and can more often display behavior that could negatively reflect on their parents.

Just as the processes studied by Crocker and Canevello (2008, 2012) can be self-reinforcing, the influence of parenting goals on parents can be strengthened by the impact that these parenting goals have on children. The presence of self-image goals motivates parental behavior directed toward psychological control, which is related to such negative outcomes in children as depression and antisocial behavior (Barber et al. 2005). Compassionate goals might instead promote parental support, which is related to children's development of social initiative and serves to protect children and adolescents against the development of depression. The positive impact of compassionate goals on children will support well-being among parents, while the negative impact of self-image goals may create stress for parents. When children are facing developmental challenges, parental support is particularly important, and psychological control deleterious, and so these reciprocal effects may be marked in families with children who have autism.

While the relationship between compassionate parenting goals and well-being may hold for all parents, documenting this connection is central to understanding the experience of parents of children with autism. Because these parents face a level of stress that goes beyond even the stress experienced by other special needs parents (Hayes and

Watson 2013), identifying variables that predict well being is particularly important. One might hypothesize from the stress literature that compassionate goals are deleterious for parents of children with autism since focusing one's energy on the persistent and difficult-to-meet needs of such children could be demoralizing (Cohen 1980). However, individual stories of parents of children with autism suggest that compassionate parenting is indeed gratifying while self-image goals are particularly maladaptive (Brodey 2007). In these stories, parents described the joy of connecting with and appreciating their unique children. They also expressed frustration at trying to maintain a positive view of their children and of themselves as parents in the face of school systems that were not able to meet the children's needs and social circles that excluded their children because of their behavioral differences and developmental delays.

While the current literature on parenting a child with autism highlights the stress and limitations of this experience (Beer et al. 2013; Hayes and Watson 2013; Huang et al. 2014; Johnson et al. 2011; Milgram and Atzil 1988; Moh and Magiati 2012; Silva and Schalock 2012; Solomon 2012; Tunali and Power 2002), the present work aims to investigate whether having a child with autism can also bring rewards in the form of a greater focus on compassionate goals. Indeed, the literature on stress-related growth suggests that difficult, even traumatic, experiences can prompt positive change (King and Hicks 2007). This literature has explored the experiences of parents of children with special needs including Down Syndrome (King and Patterson 2000; King et al. 2000) and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (Finzi-Dottan et al. 2011), although positive implications of parenting a child with autism have yet to be documented.

Studying the role of parenting goals among the parents of children with autism is also important because the experience of these parents may lead them toward a more compassionate approach toward parenting. By loving a child with atypical needs, parents may become aware of the rewards inherent in meeting those needs. Such insight may create more strongly held compassionate parenting goals. Likewise, raising a child who is not easily compared with other children might lead parents to abandon self-image goals. Thus, I report two studies that examine the relationships among compassionate and self-image parenting goals and feelings of satisfaction, efficacy and meaning among mothers of children with autism.

Study 1

Study 1 examined the relationships between compassionate and self-image parenting goals and satisfaction among

parents of children with autism and a comparison sample of parents raising only typically developing children, by administering questionnaires measuring these constructs. Several different types of satisfaction were investigated: overall life satisfaction, family life satisfaction, parental self-satisfaction, and meaning in life. I hypothesized that compassionate parenting goals would be higher among parents of children with autism, while self-image goals would be lower, as compared with the comparison sample. I hypothesized that compassionate parenting goals would positively predict all measures of satisfaction among parents, while self-image goals would negatively predict satisfaction measures.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Parents of children with autism were recruited using the Interactive Autism Network (IAN Research, 2008). IAN is an internet-based project, sponsored by the Kennedy Krieger Institute, which assists researchers by maintaining a research database of families of people with autism. Of the 150 IAN parents invited, 76 agreed to participate in the study. Of these, 74 were mothers and 2 were fathers, because of the small number of fathers, only mothers were included in the analyses. The mothers' average age was 44.1 years and all had at least one child with an Autism Spectrum Diagnosis who was currently between the ages of 5 and 18. They were primarily Caucasian, with 1 African American, 1 Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 2 indicating "other race." All had graduated high school, 22 % completed a 4-year college degree and 21 % had attended graduate school.

A comparison sample of parents was obtained using the Study Response online data collection service provided through Syracuse University. By using a prescreening questionnaire, Study Response was able to administer my questionnaire to 250 persons enrolled in Study Response who were parents of between 1 and 5 typically developing children with at least 1 child aged 5–18 years (to match the family structures in our IAN sample). Of these, 214 provided complete data. In this sample, there were 168 fathers and 46 mothers. Because of the small number of fathers from the IAN sample, only data from the mothers were used. These mothers reported an average age of 36.5 years. The comparison sample was primarily white with 5 African Americans, 5 Latinas, 2 Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, and 1 Native American. Ninety-nine percent completed high school, 33 % completed college and 20 % attended graduate school.

Both samples responded to the online questionnaire described below and were paid \$5 to thank them for their participation. The IAN sample was also asked to write a

narrative account of their experiences with their child with autism, as part of a separate study.

Measures

The online questionnaire included the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al. 1985) a 5-item instrument that measures global estimates of life satisfaction (sample item: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”), the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al. 2006) a 10-item scale which yields scores for having meaning (sample item: “I understand my life’s meaning” and seeking meaning in life (sample item: “I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful”), and the Kansas Family Life Satisfaction Scale (KFLS; Schumm et al. 1986) a 5-item measure of satisfaction with family life overall; specific aspects of family life are measured with individual items (sample item: “How satisfied are you with your family life?”). For this study, I added an item to the KFLS assessing the degree to which participants were satisfied with themselves as parents: “How satisfied are you with yourself as a parent?” These are all validated self-report instruments that have been shown to have adequate reliability in prior research and in the present sample (SWLS: *Cronbach’s* $\alpha = .91$; MLQ having: *Cronbach’s* $\alpha = .88$ MLQ seeking: $.92$; KFLS: *Cronbach’s* $\alpha = .85$).

Also included was the Parenting Goal Questionnaire (PGQ) that was developed specifically for use in this study. Items were developed based on Crocker and Canavello’s (2008) compassionate and self-image goals questionnaire. They were revised to refer specifically to the goals each mother had in raising all her children (not only the child with ASD). The PGQ starts with the stem “In the past month, in your role as a parent, how often did you want to or try to...” Parents are then asked to indicate the frequency of working toward each of 24 goal statements on a 5-point scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always). Half (12) were designed to measure compassionate parenting goals and half were designed to measure self-image parenting goals. Example compassion items include: “have compassion for your child(ren)’s mistakes or weaknesses?” and “learn more about how your child(ren) see(s) the world?” Example self-image items include: “get your child(ren) to behave in a way that make(s) you proud?” and “provide your child(ren) with opportunities that will bring recognition?” The internal consistencies of these scales were acceptable, for compassion and self-image scales *Cronbach’s* $\alpha = .85$ and $.86$, respectively.

Results

t Tests

Table 1 displays means and standard deviations of the central variables of interest for mothers of children with and without

autism. I conducted *t* tests to determine whether the two groups of parents differed in their reports of satisfaction, meaning, and goals as parents; see Table 1 for *t* values, confidence intervals and significance levels. Results revealed that the comparison sample reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction, and satisfaction with themselves as parents, while mothers of children with autism reported higher endorsement of compassionate goals as parents. While the comparison sample was higher on seeking meaning in life and self-image goals, these differences did not reach statistical significance. The two samples were similar on reported family life satisfaction and having meaning in life. These comparisons were repeated controlling for age, using analysis of covariance, because age was substantially different for the two samples, but because the results were the same, I do not include these additional analyses here.

Correlations

Table 2 shows the correlations among the main study variables. Satisfaction variables were substantially correlated with one another. Having and seeking meaning in life were negatively correlated. Compassion and self-image goal endorsement were positively correlated. Both compassion goals and self-image goals were positively correlated with family life satisfaction and parental self-satisfaction, although neither was related to overall life satisfaction. Having meaning in life was related to all three measures of satisfaction and to compassionate goals, while seeking meaning was related to self-image goals.

Regressions Predicting Satisfaction

Table 3 summarizes regression analyses predicting satisfaction variables from compassionate and self-image goals. Age and sample were also included in the analyses as control variables. Initially, all regression analyses also included the interaction between sample and each goal orientation and the three-way interaction of compassion \times self-image \times sample, but because these effects did not emerge as statistically significant they were dropped from the models reported here.

The model predicting life satisfaction was statistically significant overall, although the only individual predictor emerging as significant was sample, with mothers from the comparison sample reporting higher life satisfaction than mothers of children with autism. The model predicting family life satisfaction was also significant; in this analysis only compassionate goals emerged as a significant positive predictor. The model predicting parental self-satisfaction was significant overall and both compassionate goals and sample emerged as significant positive predictors (the comparison sample reported higher self-satisfaction).

Table 1 Study 1: Comparison of key variables for mothers with and without a child with autism

Variable	Mothers of children with autism (<i>n</i> = 74) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Comparison sample (<i>n</i> = 46) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (118)	95 % <i>CI</i> of <i>M</i> difference
Life satisfaction				
Overall	3.88 (1.51)	4.83 (1.51)	−3.35**	[−1.51, 3.88]
Family life satisfaction	4.79 (1.32)	5.03 (1.38)	−.97	[−.74, .26]
Parental self-satisfaction	4.91 (1.35)	5.46 (1.25)	−2.25*	[−1.04, −.07]
Meaning in life				
Having meaning	5.05 (1.30)	5.21 (1.32)	−.66	[−.65, .33]
Seeking meaning in life	3.88 (1.53)	4.41 (1.62)	−1.81	[−1.11, .05]
Parenting goal orientation				
Compassion	4.19 (.45)	3.92 (.60)	2.79**	[.08, .46]
Self-image	3.35 (.55)	3.51 (.71)	−1.46	[−40, .06]

* *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01

Table 2 Study 1: Correlations among variables (*N* = 120)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Life satisfaction							
1. Overall	–	.69**	.62**	.50**	−.17	.03	.11
2. Family life satisfaction		–	.81**	.59**	−.14	.35**	.25**
3. Parental self-satisfaction			–	.63**	−.07	.32**	.29**
Meaning in life							
4. Having meaning				–	−.38**	.38**	.14
5. Seeking meaning in life					–	−.08	.18*
Parenting goal orientation							
6. Compassion						–	.49**
7. Self-image							–

* *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01

Table 3 Study 1: Multiple regression analyses predicting life satisfaction variables from compassion and self-image goals controlling for age and sample

Variables	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	95 % <i>CI</i>
Dependent variable: overall life satisfaction			
<i>R</i> ² = .10*			
Predictors			
Compassion		.30 (.32)	[−.34, .94]
Self-image		.06 (.27)	[−.47, .60]
Age		−.02 (.02)	[−.05, .02]
Sample		.90** (.34)	[.22, 1.58]
Dependent variable: Family Life Satisfaction			
<i>R</i> ² = .16**			
Predictors			
Compassion		.96** (.27)	[.43, 1.49]
Self-image		.09 (.22)	[−.35, .54]
Age		.00 (.02)	[−.03, .03]
Sample		.50 (.29)	[−.06, 1.06]
Dependent variable: parental self-satisfaction			
<i>R</i> ² = .19**			
Predictors			
Compassion		.88** (.26)	[−.37, 1.40]
Self-image		.18 (.22)	[−.25, .61]
Age		.01 (.02)	[−.03, .04]
Sample		.80** (.28)	[.25, 1.35]

* *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01

Regressions Predicting Meaning in Life

Table 4 summarizes two regression analyses predicting having and seeking meaning in life from compassionate and self-image goals, with age and sample included as control variables. Both models were significant. Having meaning was positively predicted by compassionate goals and sample (with comparison mothers higher in meaning), while seeking meaning was positively predicted by self-image goals.

Discussion

As predicted, compassionate parenting goals were more strongly endorsed by mothers of children with autism. Compassionate goal endorsement positively predicted family life satisfaction, parental self-satisfaction and having meaning in life. These results support my hypotheses and are encouraging in that they suggest that the experience of having a child with autism may strengthen compassionate parenting goals, which in turn support more satisfying relationships and a sense of meaning among mothers. This pattern adds to the considerable literature showing that compassionate goals support satisfaction and growth in relationships (Canevello and Crocker 2011a, c; Canevello et al. 2013; Crocker and Canevello 2012). These findings also make an important contribution to the literature on parenting children with autism, by identifying a process that allows parents to redirect their parenting in a way that leads to satisfying relationships and a sense of personal meaning.

Mothers of children with autism did, however, report feeling less satisfied with their lives overall and with themselves as parents, as compared with parents of only typically developing children. These differences may be due to the considerable stress that parents of children with autism experience and the sacrifices that they are forced to

make in order to meet the needs of their children (Hayes and Watson 2013; Huang et al. 2014; Johnson et al. 2011). These findings must be interpreted with caution because the comparison sample was small and somewhat younger than the sample of mothers of children with autism. At least one previous study did not find differences in life satisfaction between mothers of children with autism and mothers of only typically developing children (Tunali and Power 2002). Thus, additional work is needed to determine the degree to which parenting a child with autism undermines satisfaction with life and parenting.

The difference in self-image goal endorsement between the two samples was not statistically significant. Self-image goal orientation also did not predict satisfaction measures, although it did predict seeking meaning in life. This result is interesting in that it suggests a connection between self-image and the insecure feeling of seeking a sense of purpose in life that is consistent with findings related to self-image goals in previous research (Canevello et al. 2013).

While the connections observed in Study 1 were interesting, they are limited by the very brief (1 item) measure of parenting satisfaction that was used (Miller et al. 1985). While mothers of children with autism did not report overall lower family life satisfaction, they were significantly lower in their reported satisfaction with themselves as parents. Thus, Study 2 was undertaken in order to more carefully examine the relationships between parenting goals and parenting outcomes among mothers of children with autism.

Study 2

Study 2 tapped parenting experience more broadly, by measuring both parenting efficacy and parenting satisfaction using Johnston and Mash’s (1989) *Parenting Sense of Competence Scale*. Most previous research suggests that

Table 4 Study 1: Multiple regression analyses predicting meaning in life variables from compassion and self-image goals controlling for age and sample

Variables	R ²	B (SE)	95 % CI
Dependent variable: having meaning	.19**		
Predictors			
Compassion		1.24** (.26)	[.73, 1.74]
Self-image		-.28 (.21)	[-.71, .14]
Age		-.02 (.02)	[-.01, .05]
Sample		.67** (.27)	[.14, 1.21]
Dependent variable: seeking meaning	.08*		
Predictors			
Compassion		-.59 (.33)	[-1.24, .07]
Self-image		.69* (.27)	[.15, 1.23]
Age		.02 (.02)	[-.06, .02]
Sample		.11 (.35)	[-.58, .81]

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

compassionate and self-image goals are related to affective components of relationship outcomes (Canevello and Crocker 2011c; Canevello et al. 2013; Crocker and Canevello 2008), while more recent work suggests that these goal orientations may also impact more instrumental aspects of relationship functioning such as the belief that relationships can be changed (Canevello and Crocker 2011a; Niiya et al. 2013). Study 2 sought to investigate whether compassionate parenting goals would predict both the affective dimension of parenting satisfaction and the instrumental dimension of parenting efficacy, or perceived parental competence.

Study 2 used the same on-line questionnaire methodology to administer measures of self-image and compassionate parenting goals and parenting satisfaction and efficacy to a sample of parents of children with autism. Based on the findings of Study 1, I hypothesized that compassionate goal orientation would predict both parenting variables. Self-image goal orientation was hypothesized to be a negative predictor of the parenting variables.

Methods

Participants

For Study 2, I recruited 129 mothers through the Interactive Autism Network (IAN; ianproject.org). Of the 150 IAN parents who had a child with ASD aged 4 through 18 who were contacted, 129 mothers and 1 father chose to participate (only mothers were included in analyses). The participants were compensated with a \$5 Amazon gift card for their participation.

The mothers ranged in age from 25 to 56, $M = 41.3$, $SD = 6.01$. There were 119 white participants, 5 Latino participants, 2 Asian American participants, and 3 who did not report their race/ethnicity. Of the respondents, 116 were married, 1 was living with her partner, 8 were divorced, and 4 classified themselves as “other.” The children with ASD consisted of 95 males and 34 females. These children ranged in age from 4 to 18 years, $M = 10.69$, $SD = 3.26$. The diagnoses of these children consisted of 39 with High Functioning Autism/Asperger’s Syndrome (HFA/AS), 48 with Autistic Disorder, 27 with Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and 15 with ASD (no further specification).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were invited to complete a questionnaire asking for background information, and the scales described below.

The Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (Johnston and Mash 1989) was used to measure parenting efficacy and satisfaction. This scale presents a list of 17 statements, and asks participants to rate the accuracy of each on a six-point scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” A sample efficacy item is “The problems of taking care of a child are easy to solve once you know how your actions affect your child, an understanding I have acquired,” and a sample satisfaction item is “Even though being a parent could be rewarding, I was frustrated with my children during this time period” (reverse scored). The Parenting Sense of Competence Scale demonstrated internal consistency of .75 for the Satisfaction Scale and .76 for the Efficacy Scale in prior research (Johnston and Mash 1989), and in the present sample, *Cronbach’s alphas* = .78 and .75 for Efficacy and Satisfaction, respectively.

The PGQ was again used. For this sample the PGQ showed high reliability: *Cronbach’s α* = .83 and .72 for compassionate and self-image goals, respectively.¹

Results

Parenting Goals Comparison with Study 1

Mean scores on compassionate and self-image goal scales obtained in Study 2 were similar to those for the mothers of children with autism in Study 1 and thus showed the same pattern of difference with the comparison sample from Study 1. In order to confirm that the mothers of children with autism in this sample more strongly endorsed compassionate goals, but not self-image goals as compared with mothers of only typically developing children, two 1-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to compare mean compassionate and self-image goal scores across the three samples. The ANOVA for compassionate goals was highly significant, $F(2,246) = 12.67$, $p < .000$. Bonferroni comparisons showed that the Study 2 mothers more strongly endorsed compassionate goals than did mothers from the Study 1 comparison sample, $M \text{ diff} = .41$ $CI [.21, .60]$, $p < .000$, but not the mothers of children with autism from Study 1, $M \text{ diff} = .07$ $CI [-.03, .30]$, *ns*. The ANOVA for self-image goals was not significant, $F(2,246) = 1.75$, *ns*.

¹ This questionnaire also asked parents to think back and respond to these items according to how they felt when they had only 1 child, in order to examine how the variables of interest may have changed with the introduction of a child with autism for families who had their child with autism second ($n = 35$). Because of the small number of such families, these changes are not included in the analyses reported here.

Correlations

Table 5 shows the correlations among the Study 2 variables. Parenting satisfaction and efficacy were positively correlated with one another. Again, endorsement of compassionate and self-image goals were positively correlated. Both compassionate goals and self-image goals were positively correlated with parenting efficacy, while only compassionate goals were related to parenting satisfaction.

Regressions Predicting Satisfaction

Table 6 summarizes regression analyses predicting parenting satisfaction and efficacy variables from compassionate and self-image goals. Age was also included in the analyses as a control variable. The model predicting parenting satisfaction was statistically significant overall, and compassionate goals emerged as a significant positive predictor. The model predicting parenting efficacy was also significant with a stronger effect size; again only compassion goals emerged as a significant positive predictor.

Discussion

These results confirm and extend the findings from Study 1. Similar mean levels of self-image and compassionate parenting goal scores were observed across the two samples of mothers of children with autism, and mothers of children with autism from Study 2 were higher on compassionate parenting goals than were comparison mothers. Again in Study 2, compassionate parenting goals predicted positive parenting outcomes. The effect for parenting satisfaction matched that observed in Study 1; mothers who more strongly endorsed compassionate parenting goals were more satisfied with themselves as parents. In addition a positive relationship was observed between compassionate parenting goals and parenting efficacy. These findings suggest that compassionate parenting goals affect the instrumental dimension of mothers’ relationships with their children with autism as well as the affective dimension of

these relationships. Adopting compassionate parenting goals may lead mothers to understand their children better. This deeper understanding may lead mothers to feel more confidence in their parenting ability. These findings build nicely on the findings of Study 1 in that they show that a compassionate parenting goal orientation is related not only to feelings of satisfaction and meaning, but also to feelings of efficacy. Building a sense of efficacy is important in this population, in that feeling effective encourages mothers to stay engaged in the time-consuming efforts required to successfully parent children with autism.

General Discussion

These studies are the first to investigate the impact of parenting goals among parents of children with autism. Although there is a large body of research on parenting style (Baumrind 2013; Coplan et al. 2002), there is less work that explores parenting motivation (Hastings and Grusec 1998). While stress has been extensively studied among parents of children with autism (Abidin et al. 2006; Hayes and Watson 2013; Milgram and Atzil 1988), this study adds to the smaller literature on satisfaction and well-being in this population. Identifying factors that promote well-being and satisfying family relationships is especially important for these mothers, given the challenges they face (Faso et al. 2013). The studies reported here show that compassionate parenting goals predict positive parenting outcomes including family and parenting satisfaction, parenting efficacy and meaning in life. These studies also showed a stronger endorsement of compassionate parenting goals among mothers of children with autism as compared with mothers of only typically developing children, while overall life satisfaction and parenting satisfaction was lower as compared with comparison mothers.

These findings suggest that building on compassionate parenting goals may be an effective means of buffering stress and boosting well-being among parents of children with autism. Although a strengthening of compassion may happen naturally to some degree, supporting the development of compassionate parenting goals would seem a fruitful avenue for improving the overall functioning of mothers of children with autism. Indeed, efforts have already been made along these lines through mindful parenting interventions that promote a compassionate approach (Benn et al. 2012). Mindful parenting brings a moment-to-moment awareness to parent child interactions and encourages active listening, emotional awareness and acceptance of the child (Duncan e al. 2009). This approach has been shown to be effective in reducing stress and depressive symptoms among parents of children with autism (Beer et al. 2013). This finding further supports the

Table 5 Study 2: Correlations among variables (N = 129)

Variable	1	2	3	4
Parenting outcomes				
1. Satisfaction	–	.40**	.31**	.15
2. Efficacy		–	.52**	.34**
Parenting goal orientation				
3. Compassion			–	.43**
4. Self-image				–

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 6 Study 2: multiple regression analyses predicting parenting satisfaction and efficacy from compassion and self-image goals controlling for age

Variables	R^2	B (SE)	95 % CI
Dependent variable: parenting satisfaction	.13**		
Predictors			
Compassion		.58** (.18)	[.23, .94]
Self-image		.04 (.15)	[−.26, .34]
Age		.03 (.01)	[.00, .05]
Dependent variable: parenting efficacy	.26**		
Predictors			
Compassion		.93** (.17)	[.60, 1.26]
Self-image		.23 (.14)	[−.05, .51]
Age		.00 (.01)	[−.02, .02]

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

notion that mindfully working toward compassionate parenting goals is a key to coping with parenting a child with autism.

In order to become more mindful, mothers can set aside time each day to listen to each of their children with their full attention (Duncan et al. 2009). This listening goes beyond simply hearing the words spoken by the child to carefully observing the child's body language and emotional expression and so can be carried out with children regardless of their ability to speak. Mindful parenting requires self-regulation (Duncan et al. 2009). When negative emotions are felt toward one's child, the parent is encouraged to pause and consider the child's perspective and the best parenting strategy rather than reacting automatically (Dumas 2005). Mindful parents can work toward compassionate parenting goals by thinking through motivated action plans (MAPs, Dumas). A mother who wants to be more constructive in the way she encourages her child to complete his homework can identify specific steps for making homework time distraction-free and pleasant. A mother who is working on appreciating her child's positive qualities might develop a plan to give her child a sincere compliment each evening before bed. MAPs will be most effective if they are specific, promotion focused (as opposed to avoidance focused), and proximal (Gollwitzer 1999).

These findings also extend the body of research investigating compassionate and self-image goal orientations (see Crocker and Canevello 2012) by showing that these goal orientations can be meaningfully applied to parenting. Within the present context, compassionate goals seem to be more important in promoting positive parenting outcomes than are self-image goals. This asymmetry is surprising, in that the social comparison processes inherent in pursuing self-image goals would seem to make them particularly deleterious for parents who are adjusting to the reality of having a child who may not meet many of the image-orientated expectations that parents generally have for children. While it would seem to be adaptive for parents to

reduce their focus on these expectations, the present findings emphasize that what is more important is investing energy in understanding and valuing the individuality of each child.

In addition, these findings will add to our growing understanding of the potential for growth and meaning that emerges from the challenges that shape human lives (King and Hicks 2007). While stress-related growth, ego development and maturity have been documented in parents of children with other special needs (Finzi-Dottan et al. 2011; King and Patterson 2000; King et al. 2000), the experience of parenting a child with autism has been painted as particularly bleak (Solomon 2012). By suggesting that the autism parenting experience has the potential to build compassion in parents, which supports a sense of well-being and meaning in life, the current studies open the door to the possibility of positive change through this experience.

While the findings reported here are important and interesting, there are methodological limitations to this work. These studies surveyed parents at one point in time and used correlational designs, thus opening the possibilities of reverse causality and third variable explanations. The comparison sample was smaller and less similar demographically than would be desirable. Ideally, in the future these questions will be studied longitudinally using a larger and more diverse participant population.

Cultural background, religiosity and socioeconomic circumstances have been shown to influence parenting style and practices (Chaudhuri et al. 2009, Weyand et al. 2013). These differences are important to examine among parents of children with autism because the challenges associated with raising a child with a developmental disability can negatively impact parenting style within particular cultural contexts (Nakajima et al. 2012). A fruitful avenue for future research is to examine the implications of compassionate and self-image parenting goals for families with different sets of cultural and religious assumptions and with various economic situations.

Although the current research is limited in scope, the studies reported here represent progress toward understanding the complex and potentially rewarding experiences of parents of children with autism. By going beyond the challenges of the parenting experience to document the positive impact of compassionate parenting goals, these studies bring to light a way in which parents can learn a critical life lesson from their children with autism, and in doing so can grow in their acceptance and appreciation for their families' unique experience.

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