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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Faculty of Health and Medicine, University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia. April 2014.
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Signed…………………………………………………….
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the parents who have given generously of their time to participate in this research, with special thanks going to those who were able to share their beliefs and stories during interview.

Thanks also to the staff and management of ASPECT who gave generously of their time and without whose support this project could not have been completed.

Special thanks to my supervisors Professor Louise Newman for her support and encouragement, Associate Professor Ian Dempsey for his insights and attention to detail, and Dr Richard Fletcher, my principal supervisor, whose knowledge, acceptance, encouragement, tolerance and persistence have been instrumental in helping me to reach completion.

Thank you to the management and staff of The Family Action Centre (FAC), Faculty of Health and Medicine, University of Newcastle who supported my APA scholarship and provided a stimulating, engaging and encouraging home for me throughout the project.

Particular thanks to my colleague Dr Jennifer St George who has tolerated my interruptions, granted me timely and sage advice, provided insights when they were sorely needed and without whose support this would have been a much more isolating and confusing experience.

Thanks to my children Lachlan and Bridgette who have, at times, given up valuable time with their father in the knowledge that something important and worthwhile was being done. My final and deepest thanks go to my life partner, Therese, who has demonstrated incredible loyalty and flexibility during this process. Therese, without your support this would not have been possible.
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ABSTRACT

Parents of children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are known to experience higher levels of parenting stress than almost all other parents. Parenting stress has been associated with poor child and parent outcomes, including an increased risk of parental substance abuse, depression and anxiety, and an increased prevalence of externalising behaviour problems in the parent’s children. Concern regarding outcomes associated with these high levels of parenting stress has generated a call in the autism literature for the development of effective interventions to minimise and reduce parenting stress in families where there are children with an ASD.

Coparenting quality has been associated with parenting stress and parenting self-efficacy in non-clinical samples, however these relationships have not been explored in families where there are children with an ASD. This study employed a mixed-method design to explore relationships between parenting stress, coparenting quality, and autism-specific parenting self-efficacy (ASPSE) in complementary quantitative and qualitative enquiries. In the quantitative enquiry mothers and fathers (N = 152) completed validated surveys. In a subsequent qualitative enquiry parenting couples (N = 11) participated in interviews exploring the adaptation of coparenting partnerships to the parenting of a child with an ASD.

Mothers and fathers in the present study experienced high and similar levels of parenting stress. Coparenting quality shared stronger relationships with parenting stress than any other factor and this association was stronger than that previously reported in a large non-clinical sample. Coparenting quality also mediated the relationship between ASPSE and parenting stress. Parents in the interview cohort described alterations to their coparenting partnerships that occurred in association with the parenting of a child with an ASD, the factors that motivated them to uphold their coparenting quality, and the processes that they employed to maintain and enhance their coparenting partnership.

Coparenting quality shares important relationships with the high levels of parenting stress that occur in both mothers and fathers of children with an ASD. Parents understand the importance of their coparenting partnerships, however service delivery has traditionally focused on dyadic mother/child relationships. The outcomes of this investigation should encourage researchers and service providers to give more consideration to the importance of this coparenting quality in the planning, provision and evaluation of autism services.