**Title**: Family Cohesion as a Mediator of Behavior Problems for Children with Developmental Delays

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**Introduction**: Children with developmental delays and disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, tend to have more behavior problems than children without developmental delays (Hauser-Cram & Woodman, 2016). However, the exact mechanisms that underpin this relation are still being explored. Fewer studies have examined the role of observed family interaction in predicting the development of behavior problems, particularly in families of children with developmental disabilities (Fenning et al., 2014; Sanner & Neece, 2018). The current study explored whether observed family cohesion mediated the relation between child developmental risk group (either typically developing or developmentally delayed) and mothers’ ratings of child internalizing and externalizing behavior problems.

**Method**: As part of a larger study of family interaction patterns, behavior problems, and social skills in families of children with and without children with developmental delays, mothers of 60 preschoolers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1999). Focal children were identified as either developmentally delayed (n = 30; IQ < 85 and/or parent report of a diagnosed or suspected developmental disability) or typically developing (n = 30; IQ ≥ 85 and no developmental disability). In addition, these same families were observed during a series of family activities, including cleaning up toys, making a puzzle together, and drawing as a family. Families were coded on a variety of constructs, including family cohesion. Family cohesion was defined as the degree of unity and closeness observed within the family. The final code considered the behavior and interaction of the entire family unit as a whole, including mothers, fathers, focal children, and all siblings.

**Results**: Developmental risk group was first dummy coded (0 = typically developing, 1 = developmental delay). Family cohesion scores were averaged across all 3 tasks (clean-up, puzzle, and family drawing). Correlation analyses indicated that developmental risk group was significantly correlated with observed family cohesion, such that families of children with developmental delays showed lower observed family cohesion (*r* = -0.33, *p* =.01) than typically developing families. Also, developmental risk group was significantly correlated with CBCL ratings, such that mothers rated children with developmental delays as having higher internalizing behaviors (*r* = 0.50, *p* < .001) and externalizing behaviors (*r* = 0.37, *p* = .005), as compared to mothers of typically developing children. To investigate whether observed family cohesion mediated the relation between child developmental risk group and child behavior problems, a mediation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro in SPSS. The predictor for the analysis was developmental group, and the mediator variable for the analysis was observed family cohesion. Two separate mediation analyses were run, with either child internalizing or externalizing behaviors as the outcome. Results indicate that family cohesion does not significantly mediate the relation between developmental risk group and internalizing behavior problems (b = -3.02, p = 0.31), but that family cohesion does significantly mediate the relation between developmental risk group and externalizing behavior problems (b = -7.24, p = 0.02).

**Discussion:** Results indicate that, as identified in prior research, families of children with developmental delays report higher rates of behavior problems (Hauser-Cram & Woodman, 2016). In addition, families of children with developmental delays report lower observed family cohesion. Existing studies have found inconsistent levels of family cohesion in families of children with delays compared to typically developing children, though most studies have only measured cohesion with parent questionnaires, and not family observations (Manor-Binyamini, 2016; Taylor et al., 2023). Results suggest that family cohesion is an important variable in the development of behavior problems, particularly for families of children with developmental delays or disabilities. Future interventions that target family cohesion may be particularly impactful for families of children with disabilities who have externalizing behavior problems.

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