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TITOLO DELLA TESI: EMPATIA E RISPOSTA ALLO STRESS NEI GENITORI DI BAMBINI CON SVILUPPO TIPICO E CON DISTURBO DELLO SPETTRO DELL'AUTISMO

TITOLO DELLA TESI IN INGLESE: EMPATHY AND RESPONSE TO STRESS IN THE PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH TYPICAL DEVELOPMENT AND WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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## ABSTRACT

The presence in a family of a handicapped child, particularly a child suffering with autism spectrum disorder characterized by serious relational and communicative issues, resulting in confusion and disorganization. This forces the family nucleus to handle a considerable amount of stress due to the daily management of such a complex pathology which further results in a curtailment of customary sources of parental gratification that may substantially influence the act of caring. Among the protective factors that significantly contribute to families' different adaptive paths, there are the personal attitudes adopted in front of a stressful event (coping skills) resulting in an increased capability of being proactive and managing stressful situations without being overwhelmed by them. Literature on the subject hints that the skills in parents with children affected by autism are different from those of parents whose children with typical development or affected by other conditions (Carver et al., 1989). Among parental characteristics empathy and reciprocity in the child-parent relationship helps to bring to surface the child's social capability, learning adaptability and has a crucial influence on mental processes development along the entire lifespan (Venuti, 2007; Ainsworth, 1967). According to Fonagy and colleagues (1991) a good caregiver's insightful understanding would increase the probability that the autistic child would establish a secure bond toward him and develop an adequate ability of mentalization.

Coping and empathy have been the two constructs at the core of this research aimed to investigate the differences in eighty parents of children age 3-11 divided in two groups: a "control group" consisting of parents with kids with a typical development, and an "ASD group" with parents whose kids had been diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder. Findings which were collected through EQ (Empathy Quotient; Baron-Cohen et al., 2004) and COPE (Coping Orientation to problems Experienced; Sica et al., 2008) show significant differences in the use of coping strategies aimed transcendent orientation, with higher scores in the group of parents of ASD kids. A further

difference among coping skills used by fathers and mothers, concerns the employment of strategies of social support. In both groups mothers have shown higher scores than fathers which suggests us their search of understanding, information and emotional vent, characteristics that like in the case of transcendent orientation do not pair with psychological wellness (Sica et al.2008). In regard of empathy, although not substantial statistic differences have been observed among the two groups, findings let us to discover one difference in the levels of empathy of mothers and fathers belonging to the control group, with higher scores among mothers. The study has also investigated in the control group alone, a more general condition of parental stress through the PSI-SF (Parentng Stress Index; Abidin, 1997), the perception of the child's temper through QUIT (Italian Questionnaires on Temper; Axia, 2002) and alexithymia level ascertained through TAS-20 (Toronto Alexithymia Scale; Bagby et al., 1994). Among the most noticeable findings in the comparison between mothers and fathers we have observed: (1) positive correlations among PSI scores, except for the interaction scale parent-dysfunctional child suggesting us that in the case one of the two parents may or may not perceive the child as not respondent to his/her expectations and the interaction with the child do not bolster him/her as parent (Macias et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2001; Teti et al., 2005; Verini, 2003) this does not affect the perception of the other parent; (2) positive correlations among scores of QUIT that can be read in the meaning that the child is perceived in the same way by both parents; (3) negative correlations, as expected between the alexithymia total score and EQ score.

If it's true that families with children with disabilities have to be considered as systems in evolution (Harris et al., 1987) which is an essential assumption to avert the risk of considering as permanent a less adaptive reaction in the moment the disability is diagnosed or on the other hand to consider the overcome of such a impacting diagnosis as the only obstacle a family with a disabled child must face, it's also true that such a evolution could be induced by a therapeutic project to build which it's also of crucial importance the study of the "typical" family.