



Demographic and Clinical Characteristics of 922 Autistic Preschoolers Engaged in Full-time Early Intervention

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INTRODUCTION

- As the known prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) continues to rise, there is a growing need to better understand the characteristics of those diagnosed with ASD. This need is particularly pertinent for:
 - Children, who represent the fastest growing subgroup of those diagnosed with ASD, and
 - Those with high support needs, who are likely to require the most intensive and lifelong care.
- To date, there has been no large-scale profiling study in Australia that specifically targets autistic children with high support needs.

AIM

- To improve our understanding of autistic children with high support needs by profiling a substantial cohort of children enrolled in full-time early intervention for ASD in Australia.

METHOD

Participants:

- 922 children attending one of 11 full-time early intervention centres for ASD (nine in QLD, one in SA, one in ACT) between February 2014 and December 2023.
- Aged between 24-77 months on entry.
- No other pre-screening measures or exclusion criteria were used.
- 50.9% of eligible families volunteered their data for research.

Measures:

Demographic:

- Sex
- Age of first concern, diagnosis and intake
- Culturally and linguistically diverse & First Nations status
- Primary language spoken at home

Clinical:

- Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule – 2nd ed.
- Mullen Scales of Early Learning
- Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale – 2nd and 3rd eds.

Family:

- Parenting Stress Index – 4th ed., Short Form

RESULTS

Demographic

Demographic	M	SD	N	%
Sex				
Female			192	20.8%
Male			730	79.2%
Age (months)				
First concern	18.68	8.42	782	
Diagnosis	35.86	9.33	647	
Entry	46.30	9.46	880	
CALD				
Yes			277	35.7%
No			499	64.3%
Australian First Nations				
Aboriginal			53	7.3%
Torres Strait Islander			3	0.4%
Not Indigenous			656	90.1%
Prefer not to answer			16	2.2%
Primary language at home				
English			607	83.0%
Other			124	17.0%

CONCLUSIONS

- This study is the first large-scale profiling study in Australia that specifically targets autistic children with high support needs
- By reporting these findings, this study aims to facilitate a more informed and tailored approach to addressing the unique challenges faced by this subgroup of autistic individuals.

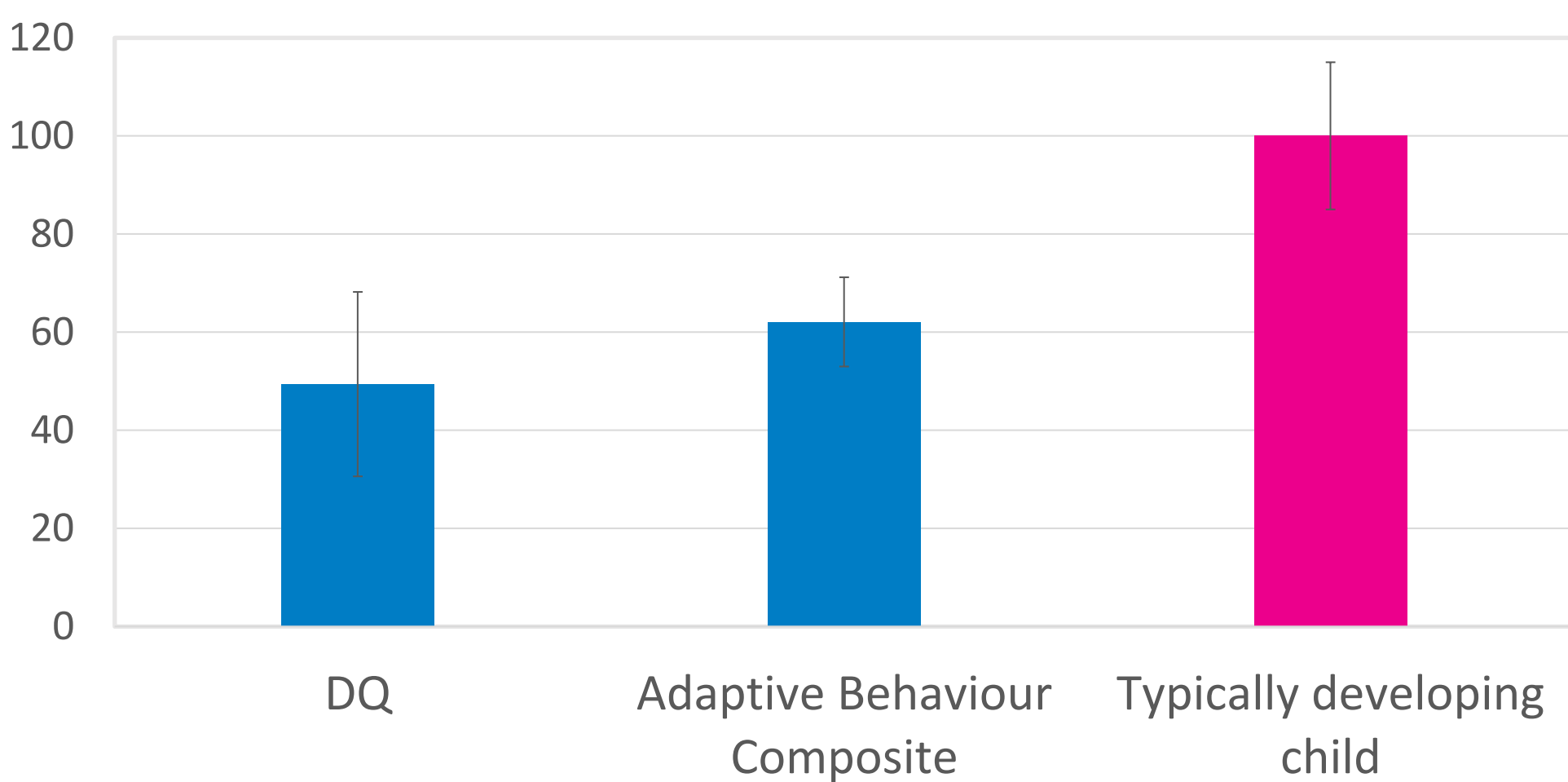
- The proportion of CALD (35.7%) and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (7.7%) individuals was higher than Australian population estimates (28% and 3.8%, respectively; AIHW, 2023).
- Linguistic diversity (17%) was lower than population estimates (23%; AIHW, 2023).

Clinical

- Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule supported sample expectations, with the vast majority of children (97%) meeting thresholds for “autism” or “autism spectrum”.
- Adaptive Behaviour scores were significantly lower than typically developing children ($t(848) = 121.28, p < .0001$) with a mean difference of 37.9 points. Scores were also 9.5 points lower than a large study using pooled data from 9,067 autistic individuals (Chatham et al., 2018).
- DQ was significantly lower than typically developing children ($t(856) = 78.83, p < .0001$) with a mean difference of 50.6 points. Scores were also notably lower than other early intervention studies with

similar samples (with mean differences ranging from 10 [Dawson et al., 2010] to 23.9 points [Zachor & Itzchak, 2010] in six identified studies).

Clinical Measures	M	SD	N	%
Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule				
Autism			497	78.1%
Autism spectrum			120	18.9%
Non-spectrum			19	3.0%
Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale				
Adaptive Behaviour Composite	62.08	9.11	849	
Mullen Scales of Early Learning				
Developmental Quotient (DQ)	49.40	18.79	857	

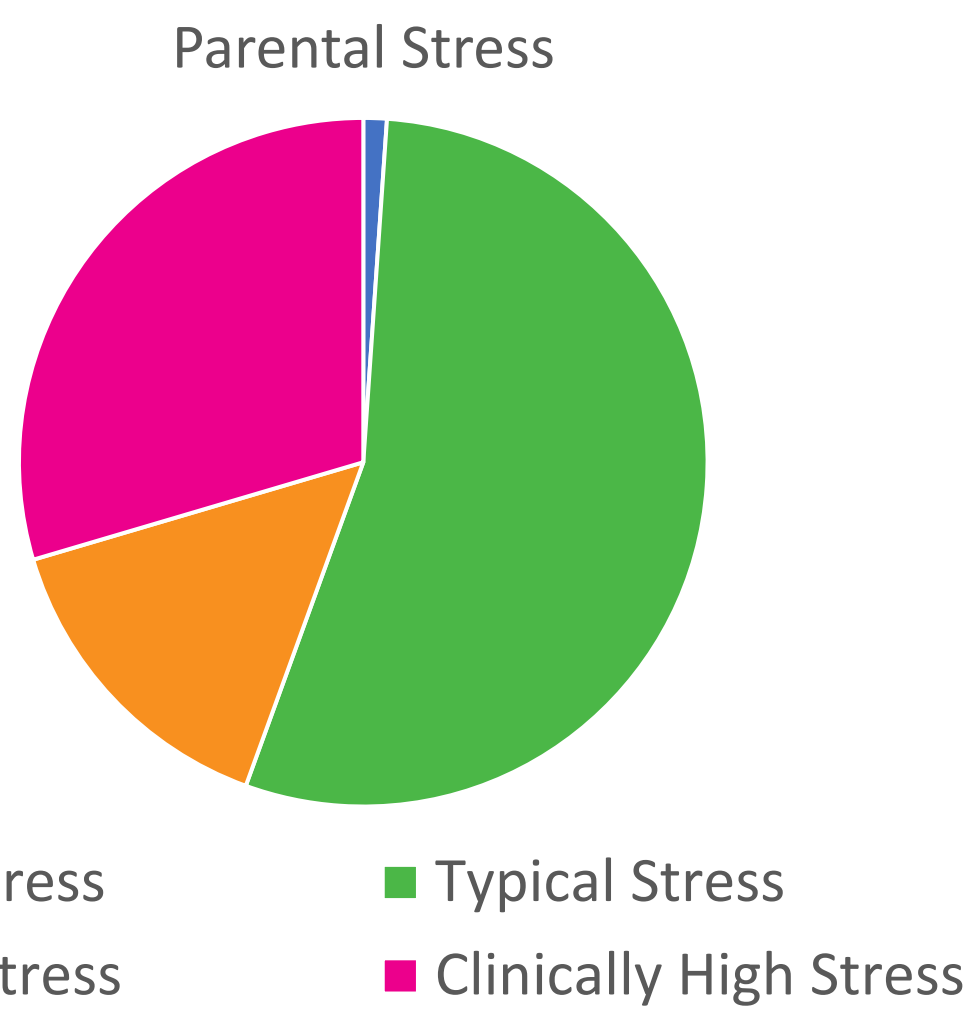


Error bars represent ± 1 standard deviation

Family

- A substantial cohort of parents (44.5%) reported ‘high’ (14.9%) or ‘clinically high’ (29.6%) stress. These findings are consistent with previously observed ranges for parents of autistic children (Hayes & Watson, 2013).

Family Measures	N	%
Parenting Stress Index		
Low stress	9	1.1%
Typical stress	437	54.5%
High stress	120	14.9%
Clinically high stress	238	29.6%



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