

AIM

To explore the experiences and opinions of autistic mothers in the following areas:

1. Pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period
2. Self-perception of parenting strengths and weaknesses
3. Communication with professionals in relation to one's child
4. Social experience of motherhood
5. Interactions with social services and the family courts in the United Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

There is little awareness of parenthood as an identity and social role for autistic adults. Previous research on mothers with severe psychiatric illness¹ and mothers with learning disabilities² found that parenthood is a desirable and central social role for individuals in both groups. The experience of motherhood by autistic women has not yet been explored. We formed an advisory panel of autistic mothers, and they identified the topics explored in this study.

One topic of particular interest identified by our advisory panel was interactions with social services and care proceedings. A lack of understanding about disabilities such as autism can lead to stigmatization. In the UK, stigmatization of parents with learning disabilities contributes to discrimination in the family courts³. For example, 75% of care proceedings involving parents with learning disability in the UK end with the child being placed in residential care, foster care, or placed for adoption by a court order³. Given that autism impacts the ability to communicate with others, and can cause difficulties with executive function (the mental processes of planning and organising), we suspected that parents with autism face similar disadvantages during the course of care proceedings. We therefore included questions relating to social services and care proceedings.

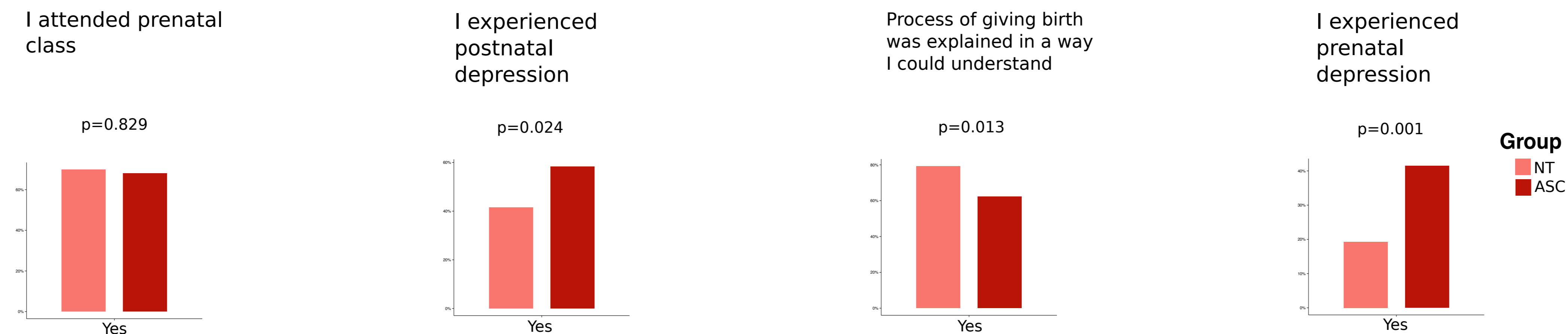
METHODS

- Community-based participatory research model
- Recruited an advisory panel of autistic mothers
- Co-developed and disseminated an anonymous, online survey
- Compared the responses of 325 autistic mothers to the responses of 91 neurotypical mothers of at least one child with autism

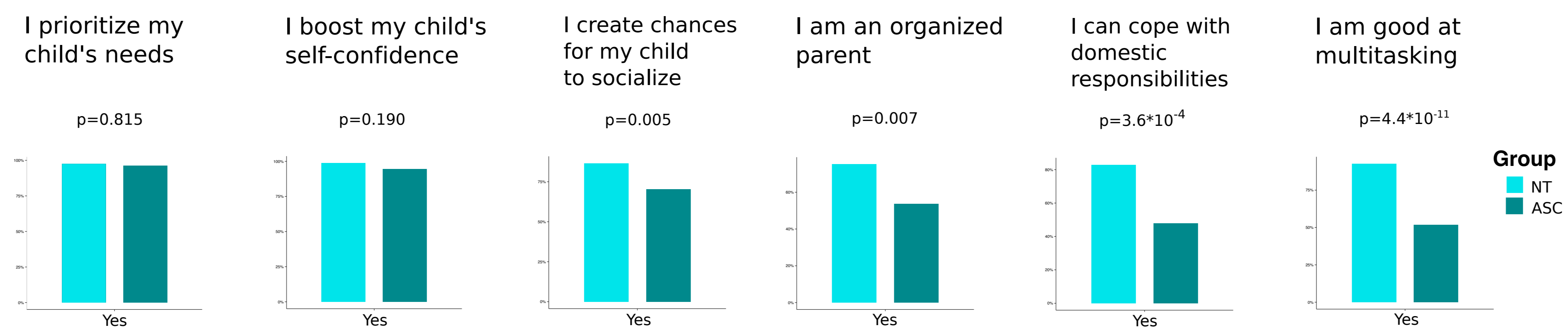
RESULTS



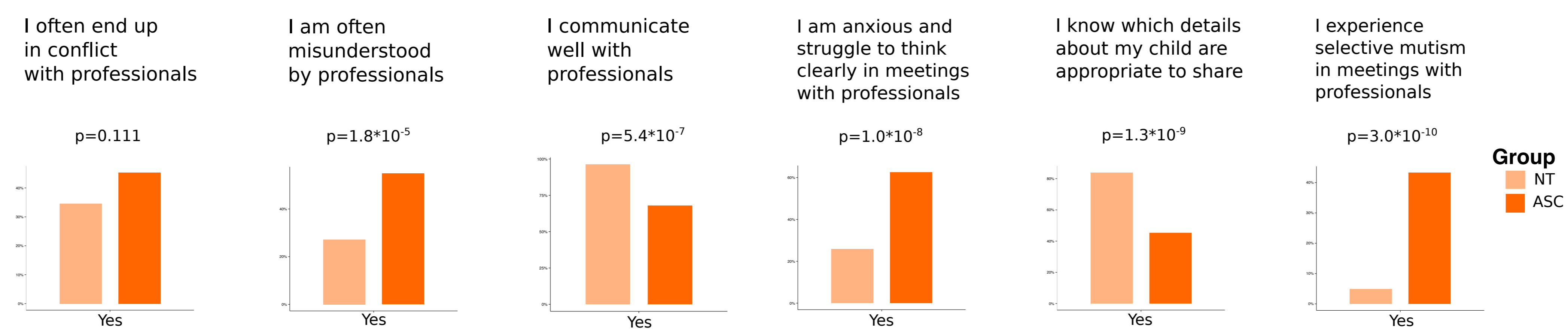
Pregnancy and childbirth



Self-perception of parenting strengths and weaknesses



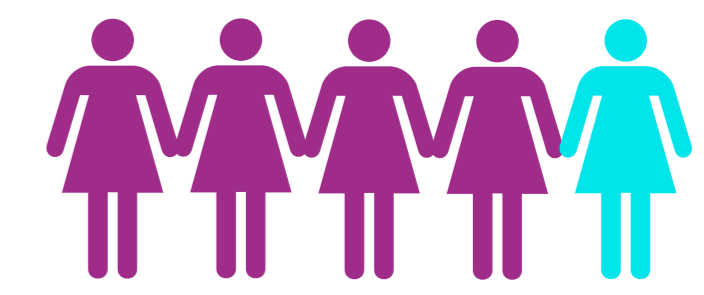
Communication with professionals in relation to one's child



Social experience of motherhood

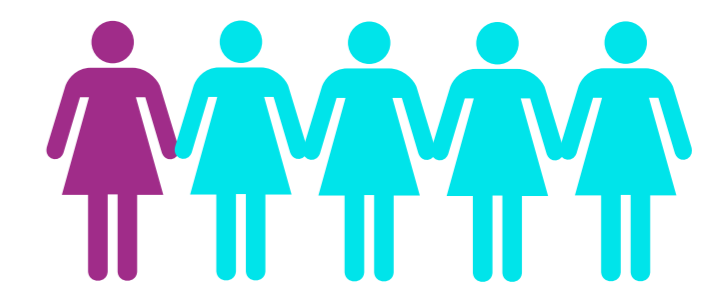


RESULTS



80% of autistic mothers in the United Kingdom do not receive the support they require after asking agencies for extra support to meet their needs as a parent.

Autistic mothers and neurotypical mothers of a child with autism were equally likely to come in contact with social services in the UK.



1 in 5 mothers of an autistic child, **regardless of whether the mother had a diagnosis herself**, reported being assessed by social services.



Of those **1 in 5**, **1 mother in 6** reported that their child/ren had been placed for adoption through a court order.

DISCUSSION

Autistic mothers would benefit from far more and better tailored support. The stigma associated with autism may be a barrier to accessing services and a source of discrimination in the family courts. Further research should consider the mental health implications of being a mother with autism. There is a clear need for more autism awareness and acceptance within the UK.

REFERENCES

1. Dolman C, Jones I, and Howard LM. (2013) Pre-Conception to Parenting: A Systematic Review and Meta-Synthesis of the Qualitative Literature on Motherhood for Women with Severe Mental Illness. *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 16:173-196.
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3. Booth T, and Booth W. (2004) Findings from a Court Study of Care Proceedings Involving Parents with Intellectual Disabilities. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 1:179-181.