

Parental Stress among Parents of Children with and without Disabilities

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Abstract

Parental stress is a factor experienced by parents of children both normal and those with a disability while parenting. Parental stress affects the psychological well-being of parents. This study compared the parental stress among parents of disabled and non-disabled children. A differential research design was applied in the study. The sample (n=200) was drawn by using convenient sampling technique and consists of (i) parents (n=100) having disabled children with sensory impairment - deaf, dumb, blindness and with physical disability and (ii) parents (n=100) having normal children. The sample was collected from special education and private sector schools of Bahawalpur. Parental Stress Scale was administered for measuring the stress level of parents. The findings revealed that parental stress is significantly higher among parents of children with disability as compared to parents of normal healthy children.

Keywords: Parental Stress, Coping Strategies, Disability, Behavioral Problems

I. Introduction

Parents are always concerned about the upbringing and care of their children. Parents change their lifestyle and make appropriate arrangements while raising their children. The emotional, physical, and behavioral problems of children are likely to increase parental stress and fatigue that potentially impacts the life and behavior of parents. Parental stress, therefore, becomes an inevitable factor of parents while meeting these challenges. The terminology "stress" is defined as "negative emotional experience accompanied by predictable physiological, cognitive, and behavioral changes, which lead to changes in perceiving the stressful situation and ability to deal with" (Wang, Michaels, and Day, 2011 quoted by Bawalsah, 2016). This definition elucidates that stress is aroused from individual's cognitive processes in evaluating one's personal

potentials to deal with the stressful situation (Seymour, wood, Jeyllet, 2013). Parental stress is defined as "*stress that parents experience not only because of child rearing, but also due to their social and environmental circumstances, responsibilities, and everyday life*" (Cronin and Becher, 2015).

Deckard (1998) found that parenting stress differs within families in significant and apparent ways. Couples may vary in the degree to which father and mother differ in levels of parenting stress. Similarly, there is the difference in the level of parenting stress among parents of normal and disabled children (Wang, Michaels and Day, 2011). The stress becomes more aroused and affects members of the family when parents spend more time and put more efforts caring a disabled child. The siblings of disabled children are affected by these efforts.

Parents of children with disability experience distinctive kinds of stresses, such as parents express permanent feelings of crisis, and consequently, are experiencing everyday challenges due to their incompetence to act or do any effort to deal with behavioral and developmental challenges of their child (Mount & Dillon, 2014). Since parenting a child with any disability is a demanding and challenging experience, therefore, such parents are at a risk to develop dysfunctional and maladaptive managing patterns for dealing their children with disabilities.

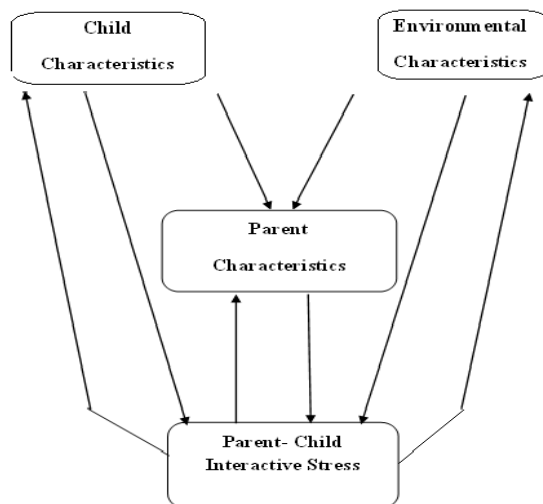
Gallagher and Whiteley (2012) described the following kinds of stress among parents of children with disability:

- Characteristics of a child with a disability including the type and/or severity of the disability, the child's dependency, age, and visibility of the disability.
- Parents and family characteristics such as social, economic, personality traits, past experiences, age, education, career, income level, perceptions about disability, and beliefs about the ability to affect the development of a child.
- A family structure such as demographic characteristics such as the rank of the child with a disability, siblings, and the presence of other disabilities in the family.
- Social factors such as attitudes in society toward disability, and availability of services to individuals with a disability.

II. Theoretical Framework of Parental Stress

The parent-child association theory explains that the parent's stress affects themselves, their children and their environment (Figure 1) (Mash & Johnston, 1990). This theory explains three domains of parental stress. Parenting domain is the first one. Factors related to stress resulting from the parent's own experience are included in this domain. (Deckard, 2004). These parent factors contain gender characteristics, family record, temperament states, child growth theories, and idea about nursing a child (Crnic & Low, 2002). Such factors directly affect parent's behavior. Child domain is the second domain and contains stress connected with child's conduct. The stressful behavior of a child consists of actions such as defiance, interrupting, carelessness, and several other behavioral problems of a child. The third domain is the association domain, and it is stress associated with parent and child affiliation. According to this theory, the presence of stress in any domain can influence negatively other domains, whereas reducing stress in any domain can have a positive impact on the other domains (Deckard, 2004).

Figure 1: Model of Parent-Child Interactive Stress Adapted from Mash and Johnson, 1990



The Parenting Stress Index (PSI; 1983, 1995) and the oldest theory which is known to be parenting stress theory, was developed by a researcher (Abidin, 1995). Even though this theory is the oldest, it still dominates researches. This theory elaborates mediators and moderators associated with parental stress. It suggests that parental stress is controlled by parent characteristics, child characteristics, and situational factors. Exterior life stressors are observed as universal factors that can intensify parental stress without any direct consequences on parental stress.

A. Difficulties Faced by Parents of Disabled Children

Gupta (2007) has described that parental stress is linked with the disability present in a child. His research has revealed that parents of children with developmental delays especially related to child rearing, experience high levels of stress (Crnic, Friedrich, and Greenberg, 1983). Therefore, the birth of mentally disabled children implies essential changes in family setup and schedules and creates an abrupt crisis that is upsetting and making strategies for handling a child with a disability more distinctive for the family organization (Hidangmayum & Khadi, 2012). Studies reported that children illness is one of the factors causing parental stress. Gupta, Mehrotra, & Mehrotra (2012), found higher parenting stress among parents of girls. Moreover, parents involved in more esteemed occupations expressed a higher level of stress as compared with parents engaged in less-status occupations. However, less support was found from extended families in taking care of a disabled child. Parents of children having developmental disabilities, especially "Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs)", are vulnerable to high levels of sufferings (Estes, Munson, Dawson, Koehler, Zhou and Abbott, 2009).

B. Rationale of the Study

Parenting practice has been found perplexing (Hidangmayum, 2012). Parental stress can be unstated in terms of distasteful psychological responses made by parents while being in the parental task (Deckard, 1998). However, it has been recognized as a

major psychological feature that affects parent's psychological wellbeing. Therefore, the present study compared the parental stress among parents of children with and without disabilities. Numerous studies displayed that parents of disabled children experience a higher level of stress as compared with parents of children without disabilities. This study also compared the level of parental stress between parents of children with and without disabilities. Although previous studies have investigated this association comparing stress among parents of children with and without disabilities in several countries, no such attempt has been made so far in Pakistan.

The study was designed to achieve following objectives:

- To compare parental stress among parents of children with and without disabilities.
- To compare parental stress among parents according to their gender and qualification

III. Research Design

Differential research design was used to compare the parental stress among parents of children with and without disabilities.

A. Participants

The parents of children with and without disabilities participated in this study. On the whole, two hundred (n=200) parents participated in this study, out of which half (n=100) were parents of children with disabilities whereas the other half (n=100) were of normal children. The age range of the parents was from 20 to 50 years or above. Few parents were educated while most of them were uneducated and belonged to the middle class. Few belonged to upper and lower class. Data was collected from special education schools and private schools in Bahawalpur.

B. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Including and excluding criteria for parents of a children with disabilities

Parents who have children between 3 and 12 years of age group with sensory impairment (deaf, dumb and blindness) and with a physical disability were included. Parents having children more than 12 years and with any other type of disability were also excluded from this study.

Including and excluding criteria for parents of children without disabilities

Parents having children between 3–12 years of age and without any disability were included in this study. Parents having children without any type of disability were excluded. Parents having children more than 12 years were also excluded.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Sample

Variables with Descriptions	Frequency	Percentage
Parent's Gender		
Mothers	73	36.5
Fathers	127	63.5
Age Range		
20-29 years	24	12.0
30-39 years	118	59.0

40-49 years	49	24.5
50 or above	9	4.5
Qualification		
Un-Educated	83	41.5
Educated	117	58.5
Marital Status		
Married	184	92.0
Divorced	9	4.5
Widow	4	2.0
Separated	3	1.5

The Parental Stress Scale

It is a self-reported scale and was developed by Berry and Jones (1995). It contains eighteen items, representing positive themes of parenthood such as personal development, self-enrichment and emotional benefits. It also contains negative factors such as opportunity costs, demands on resources, and restrictions. In the present study, Urdu version of (PSS) translated by Ali, Sabih, Jehan, Anwar, and Javed (2012) was used. The Urdu version of scale contains 19 items. Participants were asked to respond the items in terms of their association with their child on a five-point scale. The possible scale score can range between 18-95. The high scores on the scale indicate greater stress in terms of "*lower levels of parental sensitivity to the child, poorer child behavior and lower quality of parent – child relationship*". The reliability of translated version of Parental Stress Scale was found 0.73. Parents were encouraged to respond to this study. Average time taken for the administration of each questionnaire was 15 minutes.

Table 2: Comparison of Parental Stress between Parents of Children with and without Disability

Type of Children	N	Mean	S.D	Comparison using T-test		
				T	df	Sig.
Disable	100	55.00	13.62	9.77	198	0.000
Normal(without disability)	100	39.09	8.92			

Table 2 shows the comparison of parents of children with and without disabilities according the parental stress level. The comparison shows significant difference (5% level of significance) between the parental stress among parents of non-disable children and disabled children.

Table 3: Comparison of Parental Stress among Parents of Children with and without Disability

Gender of Parents	N	Mean	S.D	Comparison using T-test		
				T	df	Sig.
Mothers	42	50.52	10.979	-2.899	98	0.005
Fathers	58	58.24	14.497			

Table 3 shows overall comparison of parental stress among mothers and fathers of (with and without disability) children. The comparison shows significant difference between the parental stress among mothers and fathers.

Table 4: Comparison of Parental Stress among Parents according to their Education

Education of Parents	n	Mean	S.D	Comparison using T-test		
				T	df	Sig.
Un-Educated	65	53.06	12.101			
				-1.967	98	0.52
Educated	35	58.60	15.627			

Table 4 represents the comparison of parental stress of overall disabled and normal children according to their education. The comparison of un-educated and educated parents shows no significance difference regarding parental stress.

Table 5: ANOVA Table for Significance of Parental Stress among parents according to Age Difference

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	441.361	3	147.120	.788	.504
Within Groups	17930.639	96	186.777		
Total	18372.000	99			

The table 5 shows ANOVA for parental stress of parents of overall disabled and normal children according to age of respondents. The findings of ANOVA are not significant at 5% level of significance.

IV. Discussion

The findings of this study showed that parents of children with disability reported a higher level of stress as compared to parents of normal children. Hidangmayum and Khadi (2012) also found that most of the parents of mentally challenged children experience significant parenting stress when compared with parents of normal children. Similarly, another study showed significant difference regarding higher stress level between parents of children with and without any disability or functional limitation (Ranta, Sharma, and Gupta, 2015). However, it has found that parents of children without disabilities do not experience any parental stress. This study found that educated, as well as uneducated parents, experience the same level of parental stress. Deckard, Chen and Mallah (2013) also found that to some extent, all parents experience parenting stress irrespective of support available to them, their income and educational levels.

The present study found that fathers experience more parental stress than mothers. This finding is contrary with Theule, Wiener, Tannock and Jenkins (2013), where less difference in parental stress was identified between mothers and fathers. Similarly, Khan (2016) found significant differences regarding parenting stress between mothers and fathers. Khan (2016) found that mothers experience more parental stress than fathers.

Similarly, Beckman (1991) interviewed 54 parents having children with disability and 54 children without disability. It was found that mothers had more parental stress than fathers. Moreover, the researcher also described that mothers experience "*more depression, more difficulties with their sense of competence, more restrictions on the parental role, and more difficulties in their relationship with their spouse, more effects on their health. Results of recent study revealed that mothers experienced total stress higher than the stress experienced by the fathers*". It is probably due to the reason that mothers are a prime caretaker and are more attached to children than fathers. Leiter, Krauss, Anderson and Wells (2004) reported father's less attachment with their children, however, mothers reported more parental stress regarding role restrictions, their health and relationships with their spouse. Similarly, Oelofsen and Richardson (2004) found that mothers had higher stress scores, took an antidepressant, and also require frequent therapy than did fathers.

Feizi, Najmi, Salesi, Chorami, and Hoveidafar (2014) found that mothers of children with chronic physical problems and sensory-motor mental experience more stress than mothers of children with psychological disorders. Bishop (2012) found that mothers of the gifted children reported a significantly higher level of parenting stress as compared with mothers of a typical sample. Theule (2010) found that parents of children with ADHD, experience more parenting stress as compared with parents of nonclinical control children. Moreover, the severity of ADHD symptoms was also found linked with parenting stress.

V. Conclusion

- It is concluded that there is a significant difference regarding parental stress between parents of children with disability and parents of children without disability.
- ii. The parents of disabled children experience more stress than parents of normal children. The high level of parental stress indicates that parents show lower levels of sensitivity to their children and lower quality of parent-child relationship.
- iii. As compared with mothers, fathers experience more stress in terms of financial burden, flexible time and responsibility.
- iv. It is also concluded that educated parents and uneducated parents equally experience parental stress.
- v. Parental stress is independent of age of the children.

VI. Recommendations

- A longitudinal study can be conducted to understand the parental stress and suggest measures for their psychological wellbeing.
- Parental stress can be studied among parents of children with another type of disabilities including mental retardation.
- Researchers may use multiple models and modern methods for the in-depth study of parental stress.
- This study may be extended to include a wider variety of participants to assess parental stress and its relation to other variables.

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