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Original Research Article

Who is more stressed! Mothers of normal children or fathers of children with special needs ?

Sowmya P[1], Anitha Lakshmi[1,*]

[1] *Dept. of Physiology, Bowring and Lady Curzon Medical College and Research Institute, Bangalore, Karnataka, India*

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Normal parenting stress appears in many parents due to everyday encounters that are difficult leading to stressful events in their parenting. Many studies have shown increased parenting stress among parents of children with special needs/disabilities. This study aims in comparing parenting stress among mothers of normal children and fathers of special need children.

Objective: i) To compare stress of parenting among fathers of children with special needs and mothers of normal children.

Materials and Methods: Sheldon Cohen Perceived Stress Scale questionnaire was used to assess parenting stress on father of 120 children with special needs(study group) and mothers of 120 normal (control group) children aged between 6 and 12 years. Statistical analysis was done using unpaired t-test.

Results: The study group scored higher as compared to the control group with their means and standard deviations being (18.60 + 4.77) and (15.78 + 5.06) respectively. The statistical value of significance (p value) is 0.03.

Conclusion: The fathers of children with special needs had significantly higher parenting stress levels as compared to the mothers of normal children.

1. Introduction

Stress is an inevitable, normal experience that is felt when an individual is unsure if they can meet the demands of their environment.[1] It is important to note that "stress" is defined not necessarily by an individual's experience, but by their behavioural, emotional, cognitive, biological and interpersonal responses to that experience. In general, stress can be defined as "a negative emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, cognitive, and behavioural changes that are directed either towards altering the stressful event or accommodating to its effects".[1,2] The 2019 "State of the Education Report for India: Children with Disabilities" took into account the 2011 census, according to which there are 78,64,636 children with disability in India constituting 1.7 percent of the total child population. The transition to fatherhood - from conception, through pregnancy, and to the early months and years of parenting - can be a period of extremes. For many men, it is a time of happiness, excitement and love (Bradley & Slade, 2011; Johnson, 2002). Yet, it can also be a chapter of great upheaval and anxiety (Condon, Boyce, & Corkindale, 2004; Fenwick, Bayes, & Johansson, 2012; Hanson, Hunter, Bormann, & Sobo, 2009).

Fathers of these children are required to deal with an alteration in the family dynamics which requires a modification of their activities with the increased burden of caring for a child who cannot adequately care for itself. There is also considerable stress associated with the concern for their child's future potential, prognosis, and financial burden to fulfil their needs.

Parenting is the process of promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood. "Parenting stress" as stress that is felt in response to the demands of

* *Corresponding author*.
E-mail address: anithalakshmi1612@gmail.com (A. Lakshmi).

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being a parent — stress that is often experienced as negative feelings toward the self and toward the child or children. By definition these negative feelings are directly attributable to the demands of parenthood.

Special needs is a term used in clinical diagnostic and functional development to describe individuals who require assistance for disabilities that may be medical, mental, or psychological.[3] These are the children, who may have challenges which are more severe than the typical child, and could possibly last a lifetime, they will need extra support, and additional services. They will have distinct goals, need added guidance and help them in meeting their academic, social, emotional, and sometimes medical milestones. These Families may experience a myriad of emotions upon diagnosis, including anger, grief, loss, and denial.[4] There are four major types of special needs children:

1. Physical – muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, chronic asthma, epilepsy, etc.
2. Developmental – down syndrome, autism, dyslexia, processing disorders
3. Behavioral /Emotional – ADD, bi-polar, oppositional defiance disorder, etc.
4. Sensory Impaired – Blind, visually impaired, deaf, limited hearing[5]

Sheldon Cohen Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is the most widely used psychological instrument for measuring the perception of stress. It is a measure of the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. Items were designed to tap how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives. The scale also includes a number of direct queries about current levels of experienced stress.

2. Materials and Methods

Sheldon Cohen Perceived Stress Scale questionnaire was used to assess parenting stress on father of 120 children with special needs (study group) and mothers of 120 normal (control group) children aged between 6 and 12 years. The PSS scale was assessed using the questionnaire. Both the study group and control group were asked to fill the questionnaire separately in order to avoid bias.

2.1. Inclusion criteria

1. Age of parents should between 2 3 – 50 years.
2. Age of children should be between 6 -12 years.
3. Study group includes m others of normal children.
4. Control group includes fathers of special children.

2.2. Statistical analysis

The PSS score was analysed using Unpaired t-test.

3. Result

The fathers of children with special needs (study group) are stressed due to parenting more than the mothers of normal children (control group) with their means and standard deviations being (18.60 + 4.77) and (15.78 + 5.06) respectively. The statistical value of significance (p value) is 0.03.

Table 1: Study of PSS score in comparison between study and control group

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances		
	Study (i)	**Control (i)**
Mean	18.60	15.78
STDV	4.77	5.06
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.03	

4. Discussion

Our study shows that fathers of children with special needs experience significantly higher levels of parenting stress than mothers of normal children. Parental role induces a state of stress and anxiety which we see as threats, possible loss, but as a challenge, too. Parenting showed to be more stressful for those parents who have children with special needs. Even though the mothers of normal children are stressed by the parenting, it is also acknowledge that parents of children with a disability vary in the levels of stress they experience and that their levels of stress levels are associated with a wide range of variables (Frey et al. 1989; Quine & Pahl 1991; Baxter et al. 2000). Generally it seems that specific characteristics associated with disability are more important correlates of parental stress (Minnes, 1998). These include child communication skills (Frey et al. 1989) and particularly the levels of the child's behavioural and difficulties (Friedrich et al. 1981; Konstantareas & Homaditis, 1998; Quine & Pahl, 1991). This stems from a consideration of recent findings showing that raising children with health difficulties is associated with higher levels of parenting stress (Bendell, Culbertson, Shelton, & Carter, 1986; Frank et al., 1991). In the study by Perry, McGarvey and Pastor (1992) highlighted that specific child characteristics are directly correlated with the parents' level of stress. These include age, sex, diagnosis, IQ, level of self-help skills, and so forth.[6] Parenting stress escalates at a much faster rate among fathers of disabled children in comparison to fathers of non-disabled children. A disability affects not only the individual, but the family as well 1). The addition of a disabled child to a family requires fathers to adopt new roles and responsibilities and, in turn, creates a change in the function of the family system. Indeed, disabled children often demand more effort in daily activities and social integration than non-disabled children.[7]

Although fathers' stress has been shown to have important implications for children's health and well-being,

few studies of children with special needs have considered paternal parenting stress. The current study contributes to the literature in parenting stress among fathers of children with special needs.

5. Source of funding

None.

6. Conflict of interest

None.

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Author biography

Sowmya P Assistant Professor

Anitha Lakshmi Associate Professor

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