

Stress and Coping in Mothers of Autistic Children

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Parenting a child with a developmental disability is an exhausting task especially for mothers as they are more involved with care giving. This research examined the stress and coping experienced by mothers of autistic children (AC) and mothers of normal children (NC). A quasi-experimental research design was used. The participants were 25 mothers of AC and 30 mothers of NC having children between age group of 3 and 12 years. It was hypothesized that mothers of AC would experience more stress and use less effective coping strategies compared to mothers of NC. Assessments of mothers were carried out by administration of the scales in special and normal schools. Stress and Coping were assessed using Parental Stress Scale and Ways of Coping Questionnaire, respectively. Analysis was done using t-test and Pearson's correlation. It was found that mothers of CWA experience more stress than mothers of NC and they tend to cope by seeking social support, escaping/avoiding or by positively reappraising the situation more frequently than mothers of normal children. A significant positive correlation was found between stress and the use of Confrontative coping in mothers of children with autism.

Keywords: Stress and coping, autistic children, normal children

When a child is diagnosed as disabled, there is a change in the way society deals with that child, both formally through special institutions and informally in the way members of a society react to disabled children. By association too, the diagnosis of disability in a child has implications for the mother in the way in which she constructs her particular tasks because of the images of motherhood available to her based on healthy able-bodied children. Indeed, becoming a parent of any child calls for a role change that subjects new parents to many unique stresses that may constitute a crisis. The birth of an exceptional child adds a situational crisis, one that results from an unanticipated, traumatic event beyond parents' control. When parents become aware of their child's exceptionality; they are inevitably shocked and painfully surprised. They must suddenly adjust to a new role as the parents of an exceptional child, and they must adjust their self-image to cope with new

responsibilities and functions (Gregory, 1991). Some parents experience helplessness, feelings of inadequacy, anger, shock and guilt, periods of deep sadness and depression. This is true irrespective of what the disability may be (Frude, 1992). For the parents of a child with autism, these emotions are heightened by the fact that the baby is invariably born healthy and apparently normal. The most dramatic adjustment to a child's exceptionality is made by mothers and the coping behaviors they develop affect the family as a social system. They are at a higher risk at succumbing to the effects of long term stress than fathers. Bristol, (1984) found that mothers of children with autism were less involved with people and activities outside the home. Mothers of children with developmental disabilities have been reported to show significantly higher stress levels and report more negative child characteristics than mothers of children without disabilities

(McKinney & Peterson, 1987). Hence motherhood is very challenging for mothers of exceptional children (Shea & Bauer, 1985). Review of literature revealed that the presence of a child with a disability or illness is stressful for parents especially mothers, but very few studies have explored the relationship between stress and the way mothers' of children with autism cope with the fact of disability in their child.

The objectives of the study were to compare mothers of children with autism and normal children with respect to their stress and ways of coping and to find out whether any relationship exists between the variables in the two groups.

Method

Sample:

The nature of research design was Quasi-Experimental. The independent variables in this study were the presence of Autism in the child. The dependent variables were stress and ways of coping. Purposive non random sampling method was used. Total sample size was 55. Participants were 25 mothers of children with autism (CWA) - (group A); their mean age being 32 years and

30 mothers of normal children (NC) - (group B); their mean age being 35 years. The children were in the age group of 3-12 years with mean age of CWA being 6 years and those of NC being 8 years.

Tools used:

Parental Stress Scale: It was developed by Berry and Jones in 1995. It consists of 18 items that describe the parent-child relationship and the parents' feelings regarding it. Parents respond by indicating the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement. This scale has satisfactory levels of internal reliability (.83), and test-retest reliability (.81).

Ways of Coping Questionnaire: It was developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1988). It assesses thoughts and actions individuals use to cope with the stressful encounters of everyday living. There are 66 items and response format is based on a four-point likert type scale, where respondents could indicate the frequency with which they use each strategy. Items on this questionnaire have been designed to be answered in relation to a specific stressful encounter.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Mean, SD and t- value for mothers of children with autism and mothers of normal children with regard to stress experienced.

Groups	Mean (SD)	t-value
Mothers of children with Autism (A)	44.56 (±9.05)	3.986*
Mothers of normal children (B)	36.3 (6.21)	

*p<0.01

Table 2. t- value for mothers of children with autism and mothers of normal children with regard to their ways of coping.

Groups	t-value								
	CC	D	SC	SS	AR	EA	PS	PR	
Mothers of children with autism (A) and mothers normal children (B)	1.21	1.98	0.74	5.723**	0.38	2.785**	0.54	2.324*	

**p<0.01 *p<0.05

Table 3. Coefficient of Correlations between stress and ways of coping as experienced by mothers of CWA.

Variables	r
Stress and Confrontative Coping	0.398*
Stress and Distancing	-0.33
Stress and Self Controlling	-0.38
Stress and Seeking Social Support	-0.30
Stress and Accepting Responsibility	-0.065
Stress and Escape Avoidance	0.07
Stress and Planful Problem Solving	-0.26
Stress and Positive Reappraisal	-0.39

*p<0.05

This study was conducted with the purpose of comparing mothers of children with autism and mothers of normal children with regard to their stress and ways of coping with the same and also to explore the relationship between the two. The results from table 1 reveal that there is a significant difference between the two groups of mothers with regard to the stress experienced in dealing with a child ($t(df=53) = 3.986, p<0.01$). Mothers of children with autism have been found to experience more stress while interacting with their children than mothers of normal children. This is in line with the study by McKinney and Peterson (1987), who reported that mothers of children with developmental disabilities show significantly higher stress levels than mothers of children without disabilities which could be because of the child's disability, with its accompanying behavior problems and other difficulties which makes parenting such children stressful. According to Johnson (1985), part of the stress stems from the amount of time needed to care for the child and the reduced freedom family members have in their schedule. The family also faces many difficult decisions and must learn about the illness/disability and how to care for the child. With regard to the use of coping strategies (table 2), no significant differences exist between the two groups with regard to the use of Confrontative coping, distancing,

self-control, accepting responsibility and planful problem solving. Most of these coping strategies are very direct by nature necessitating the mother to play a very active role in dealing with the stressful situation. This however might have been difficult to adopt by them owing to the non-assertive nature of Indian women. However the two groups differ significantly in their use of the following coping processes:

Seeking social support ($t(df=53) = 5.723, p<0.01$): Mothers of children with autism have been found to use this coping strategy more frequently than mothers of normal children. To cope with the stress of having a special child, mothers of these children have more often tried to seek informational support, tangible support and emotional support than mothers of normal children. This is in line with the finding by Taanila, Syrjälä, Kokkonen, & Järvelin (2002), who studied the coping of parents with physically or intellectually disabled children and found that social support was one of the strategies most frequently used.

Escape-avoidance ($t(53)=2.785, p<0.01$): Mothers of children with autism have used this coping mechanism more often than mothers of normal children. This could be because of the nature of the child's disability, with its accompanying behavioral difficulties which prove stressful to the mothers and hence they have tried to cope with it by avoiding or shirking their responsibilities. Having a child with autism causes stress in the mothers, with which they have coped by using wishful thinking and by escaping or avoiding the problem.

Positive reappraisal ($t(53)=2.324, p<0.05$): a significant difference exists between the two groups with regard to positive reappraisal coping strategy. Mothers of children with autism have been found to use this coping strategy more frequently than mothers of normal children. While dealing with the stressful situation of having a special child

with autism, the mothers have tried to create positive meaning out of the situation, by focusing on personal growth and through religious means.

The study of the relationship between stress and coping revealed that a significant positive correlation exists between stress and Confrontative coping in mothers of children with autism (table 3: r (df=53) = +0.398, $p < 0.05$). It is thus inferred that in these mothers as the stress level experienced by them increases, they adopted a more confrontative coping approach often. In other words, with more stress experienced, mothers used more aggressive efforts to alter the situation and are willing to engage in risk taking and hostile behaviors. No significant relationships were found between stress and other coping strategies. The study was limited by the fact that gender of the child was not taken into account nor were fathers and siblings included. Small sample size has limited the generalizability of the findings. Hence future studies should explore these factors also.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate clearly the need for designing an intervention program for mothers of children with autism which should be implemented in special schools for these children. There is a strong need for employing a counselor/psychologist in such schools who should work with the mothers as well as the special child and help them deal with the stressors encountered during the daily care of the child.

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