

Stress Appraisal and Coping Strategies among Parents of Physically Challenged Children

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In order to ascertain the impact of a handicapped child in the family, the study was designed to examine and compare the level of stress and coping strategies among parents of physically challenged and normal children. 60 parents (either father or mother) of school going children (30 in each group, namely parents of physically challenged and normal children) were taken for the study. Peacock and Wong stress appraisal measure was used to examine their level of stress whereas Folkman and Lazarus ways of coping questionnaire was used to assess coping strategies adopted by the two groups of parents. It was found that the level of stress among parents of physically challenged children was much higher and significantly differed with their normal counterparts. The two groups also differed significantly in terms of their coping strategies where parents of normal children were much better than the parents of physically challenged group.

The birth of any child can have a significant effect on the dynamics of the family. Parents and other children in the family must undergo a variety of changes to adapt to the pressure of a new member. The effect on the family of the birth of a disabled child can be even more profound. The physically challenged children are frequently characterized by extremes of behaviors, which in some cases influence the interactions they have with parents and siblings. The extra care and special accommodations are required by them. Families of physically challenged children probably vary in their behavior, social attitude and family relationships as compared to families who do not have disabled children.

Family first tries to become aware of the problem of children, recognize it, seek to find out the cause of the problem and then search for rectification. Though the presence of a physically challenged child need not create a family crisis, the stigma of disability imposed

by the society can be offending to the parents and the family. It is said that denial, projection of blame, guilt, grief, withdrawal, rejection and acceptance are usual parental reactions. The parent's religion may be directly related to the degree of acceptance of the handicapped child. Moelsae and Moelsae (1985) studied the defenses of family members to observe the reactions of the family when faced with a dysfunction in one of its members and found that the birth of a disabled child interrupted the normal life cycle of the family, leading to a crisis. The first reaction in the parents was most often denial, but ultimately adaptation was demonstrated.

Today there is a growing trend in the mental health field to consider salience not just related to child alone, but the salience of entire family, and there is an acceptance tendency to provide services on a family basis rather than simply to the individual presenting problem. There is abundant evidence that

parents of disabled children undergo more than average amount of stress. However, research has also shown that stress is not an inevitable consequence in these families (Beresford, 1994). The nature of stress has been shown to span over several aspects of family life such as daily care demands, emotional distress, interpersonal difficulties, financial problems and adverse social consequences. In a study on families with a new born baby with Down Syndrome Gath (1978) found differences in mental or physical health of the two groups of parents and also differences in their marital relationship. In general, increased levels of stress threaten a person's well being and produce automatic, persistent attempts to relieve the tension. In coping with stress, a person is confronted with two challenges: To meet the requirements of the stressors and to protect oneself from psychological damage and disorganization. The mechanisms including such responses as denial and suppression, relieve and anxiety and protect the self from hurt and devaluation. They protect a person from external threats such as failures in work or relationships and non-internal threats, such as guilt arousing desires or action.

Beresford (1994) considered the ways parents cope with the chronic strain and daily stressors associated with caring and bringing up a disabled child. The review has been structured around key concepts from the process model of stress and coping. Coping resources – personal and socio-economic – have been described, and the notion of vulnerability when resources are not available has been considered.

Viewing the profound impact of disabled child on the family the present study was designed to examine the level of stress among the parents and ways of coping with stress adopted by them. For this purpose, a controlled group of parents of normal children (in equal number) was also taken for the study so that the two groups of parents can be

compared on their level of stress and ways of coping. On the basis of review of literature the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. There will be significant difference in the level of stress between the parents of physically challenged and normal children.
2. There will be significant difference in the stress coping strategies of parents of physically challenged and normal children.

Method

Sample:

60 parents (either father or mother) were taken for the study, out of which 30 were parents of physically challenged male children and 30 were of normal male children. Parents of physically challenged children were selected purposively on the basis of addresses provided by the different special schools of Delhi. Whereas normal children's parents were also taken purposively from the nearby locality of similar socio-economic background. The parents of primary grade children whose age was ranged from 7-12 years were considered for both the categories.

Tools:

Stress appraisal measure (SAM) by Peacock and Wong (1989) was used to assess level of stress among the sample. The measure consisted of 28 statements rated on a scale from 1 to 5 stating not at all, slightly, moderately, considerably and extremely. There were seven subscales of the measure and each subscale consisted of four statements which assess both primary and secondary cognitive appraisal as well as overall stressfulness. For assessing stress coping strategies, ways of coping questionnaire by Folkman and Lazarus (1988) was administered on the subjects. The questionnaire assessed thoughts and actions individuals use to cope with stressful situation of every day life. The questionnaire consisted of 60 items divided into eight subscales. There were four alternative for each statement, i.e.

does not apply or not used, used some what, used quite a bit and used a great deal.

Procedure:

For the purpose of collection of data, different exceptional schools were visited by the investigators and requested the heads of the institutions for addresses of children studying in their schools on the basis of addresses provided by their parents. They were contacted personally and data were collected with the help of above tools. Parents

of normal children were also contacted individually side by side from the same locality in order to make both groups equal in some respects.

Results and Discussion

The data obtained on the basis of administration of tools were analyzed with the help of different statistical techniques like mean, SD, 't' etc. and the results are presented in the tables to follow.

Table 1: Mean, SD and t values of Stress Appraisal and Stress Coping Strategies Scores among Parents of Physically Challenged (N=30) and Normal Children (N=30).

Variable	Group	Mean	S.D.	t value
Stress appraisal	Parents of physically challenged children	112.5	7.6	22.1**
	Parents of normal children	39	5.0	
Stress coping strategies	Parents of physically challenged children	93.41	7.6	16.6**
	Parents of normal children	49.3	4.61	

** p< 0.01

Table 2: Correlations between the Scores on Stress Appraisal and Ways of Coping for Physically Challenged and Normal Groups.

Measures	Physically Challenged Group	Normal Group
r between scores on stress appraisal and coping strategies	-0.49**	-0.35**

** p< 0.01

The results (table-1) indicate that there were significant differences in the level of stress among the parents of physically challenged and normal children as mean scores on stress appraisal were found to be 112.5 and 39.0 for the parents of physically challenged and normal children respectively. The level of stress was found much higher among the parents of physically challenged children as evident from the results. The mean score on stress for the said group was found 112.5 against the maximum possible score of 140 whereas for the normal group it was 39.0 which was almost one third of the physically challenged group. The difference between the scores of two groups, was also found to be

significant (t=7.6**). On the basis of the result, it can be said that birth of a disabled child in a family certainly puts pressure on the parents and increases their level of stress perhaps because parents of disabled children frequently wrestle with the terrifying feeling that they are in some way responsible for their child's condition.

Prevalence of guilt is one of the most commonly reported feelings among parents of exceptional children probably because primary cause of so many disabilities is unknown. Similar finding was also obtained by Ferguson and Watt (1980) who found that mothers of handicapped children reported more family problems than did those of normal children.

Thus it can be inferred that parents of physically challenged children suffer from high level of stress unlike parents of normal children. Hence the hypothesis of significance difference between the two groups of parents with regard to their level of stress is found to be confirmed.

As far as ways of coping with stress was concerned, the results revealed that there were differences between the scores of parents of physically challenged children and that of normal children as the mean scores for the two groups of parents were found to be 93.4 and 149.3 respectively. The findings clearly indicated that the stress coping strategies of parents of normal children were certainly better than the parents of physically challenged children. The 't'-value between the scores of two groups of parents was also found to be significant ($t=16.6^{**}$) which indicates that parents of disabled children not only suffer from high level of stress due to presence of a disabled child in family but also found incapable of coping with stress properly. The failure of parents of physically challenged children on stress coping front can be attributed to the fact that mechanisms generally they adopt such as denial and suppression may relieve anxiety and protect the self from hurt and devaluation. Such mechanisms protect a person from external threats such as failure in work and relationships and not from internal threats like guilt arousing feeling or action.

Crinic, Friedrich and Greenberg (1983) also suggested that family adaptation to a handicapped child is a result of the interaction between child related stress, families resources and ecological variables. Thus it can be said that effectiveness of coping strategies depends on the nature and types of stress that is why parents of physically challenged children differ from parents of normal children on stress coping front which support the hypothesis 2. In order to ascertain relationship between level

of stress and ways of coping with stress among the parents, coefficient of correlation was computed between the scores on two variables. It was found that the two variables were inversely (but significant) related with each other for both the groups of subjects ($r=0.49$ and 0.35 for physically challenged and normal group respectively).

On the whole, it can be concluded that the presence of a disabled child in the family causes tremendous amount of stress particularly among the parents and they find difficulty in managing them because stress of such type usually differs from everyday life stress.

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