



## Original Research Article

## Comparison of parenting stress between parents of children with special needs and those with normal children: A special focus on paternal stress

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Parenting is a major form of stress, especially in children with special needs. Chronic conditions of disability, may be medical, psychological or emotional, make extra demands on parents, resulting in stress.

**Objective : i)** To evaluate parenting stress among parents (mother & father) of children with special needs and normal children. **ii)** To compare parenting stress among fathers of special children and normal children.

**Materials and Methods:** Parenting stress was assessed using Sheldon Cohen Perceived Stress Scale questionnaire on **i)** Parents of 100 special needs [study group **(i)**] and 100 normal [control group **(ii)**] children aged between 5 and 12 years. **ii)** Fathers of 100 special needs children [study group **(ii)**] and fathers of 100 normal children [control group **(ii)**]. The Questionnaire was provided to both parents, they were seated separately in order to avoid bias. Statistical analysis was done using Unpaired t-test.

**Results : i)** The study group scored higher as compared to the control group with their means and standard deviations being (18.914 + 5.24) and (16.12 + 4.18) respectively. The statistical value of significance (p value) is 0.0009. **ii)** The fathers of children with special needs scored higher than fathers of normal children with their means and standard deviations being (18.61 + 4.78) and (16.43 + 3.32) respectively, with the p value being 0.02.

**Conclusion:** The parents of special children had significantly higher parenting stress levels as compared to the parents of normal children and fathers of special need children were more stressed than the fathers of normal children. It is important to address this stress as it could lead to impairments of overall quality of life in both parents and their child or children.

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### 1. Introduction

Most of the researches have investigated the effects of disabilities of children on families especially with more focus on mothers. Our study aims to focus on the stress level of fathers of special need children and normal children. Stress is an inevitable, normal experience that is felt when an individual is unsure if they can meet the demands of their environment.<sup>1</sup> 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”.<sup>1,2</sup>

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 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.<sup>3</sup>

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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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>6</sup>

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).

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

Parenting stress was assessed using Sheldon Cohen Perceived Stress Scale questionnaire and was conducted on i) Parents of 100 special [study group (i)] and 100 normal [control group (ii)] children, aged between 6 and 12 years. The parents were aged between 25 to 50 years.

ii) Fathers of children with special needs [study group (ii)] and fathers of 100 normal children [control group(ii)] aged between 25 to 50 years.

The questionnaire was provided to both parents, they were seated separately in order to avoid bias.

### 2.1. Inclusion criteria

1. Age of parents should between 25 – 50 years.

2. Age of children should be between 6 -12 years.
3. Study group includes i) Mothers and fathers of children with special needs. ii) Fathers of children with special needs.
4. Control group includes i) Mothers and fathers of normal children. ii) Fathers of normal children.

### 2.2. Statistical analysis

The F-Test was used to compare two Variances. The PSS score was analysed using Unpaired t-test.

## 3. Result

i) The parents of children with special needs [study group(i)] scored higher as compared to the parents of normal children [control group(i)] with their means and standard deviations being (18.914 + 5.24) and (16.12 + 4.18) respectively. The statistical value of significance (p value) is 0.0009.

ii) The fathers of special needs children [study group(ii)] scored higher than fathers of normal children [control group(ii)] with their means and standard deviations being (18.61 + 4.78) and (16.43 + 3.32) respectively, with the p value being 0.02

**Table 1:** Study of PSS score in comparison between study (i) and control(i) group

<b>t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances</b>		
	<b>Study (i)</b>	<b>Control (i)</b>
Mean	18.91	16.12
Variance	27.45	17.48
Observations	58	58
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	109	
t Stat	3.17	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0009	

**Table 2:** Study of equality of variance between fathers of study(ii) and control (ii) groups

<b>F-Test Two-Sample for Variances</b>		
	<b>Study(ii)</b>	<b>Control (ii)</b>
Mean	18.61	16.43
Variance	22.84	10.99
Observations	28	28
df	27	27
F	2.08	
P(F<=f) one-tail	0.03	

## 4. Discussion

Our study shows that parents of children with special needs experience significantly higher levels of parenting

**Table 3:** Study of PSS score in gathers between study (ii) and control groups(ii)

<b>t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances</b>		
	<b>Study(ii)</b>	<b>Control (ii)</b>
Mean	18.61	16.43
Variance	22.84	10.99
Observations	28	28
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	1.98	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.02	

stress than parents of normal children. Parents of children with an intellectual disability (ID) are likely to experience significantly higher levels of parenting stress than parents of nondisabled children (Rodrigue, Morgan, & Geffken, 1990; Dyson, 1997; Roach, Orsmand & Barrat, 1999). However despite these broad findings, 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). A few studies have found that parenting stress is associated with the severity of the child ID's (Minnes, 1998). Although others have failed to find any similar associations. (Beckman, 1983; Walker, Van Slyke, & NewBrough, 1992). 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). 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.<sup>7</sup>

Parenting stress escalates at a much faster rate among mothers of disabled children in comparison to mothers 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 parents 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.<sup>8</sup>

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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