

Chapter 76

Stress and Anxiety Among Parents of Children With Communication Disorders

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ABSTRACT

Parenting is a wonderful and rewarding experience, but in the case of parents of children with communication disorder, this experience is often accompanied with high levels of stress, due to difficulties, frustrations, and challenges that these parents face in everyday life. This chapter was carried out to find the status of stress in parents of children with communication disorder and also to find the levels of stress among mothers as well as fathers, and the level of support system available. The results revealed that most of the parents experience stress and anxiety in bringing up their child with communication disorder, although the stress being more in the mothers. Gender of the child also played a crucial role in determining the levels of stress. The results highlighted the fact that parents of children with autism spectrum disorder have a higher level of stress followed by parents of children with intellectual disability, multiple disability, and hearing impairment.

INTRODUCTION

The most valued relationships are found within the family. Family act as foundation for the child's holistic development, socialization and formation of his/her beliefs. Parenting is a wonderful and rewarding experience, although mostly accompanied by high levels of stress because of the difficulties and challenges that the parents face in everyday life, this stress being even more in the case of parents of children with communication disorders (Hodapp, Ricci, Ly, & Fidler, 2003). How the parents react to stress depends on a variety of factors like individual, family and environmental factors. Some families may view this as intimidating, while some may emerge stronger in this process. When the parent feels inundated by the stress associated with bringing up a child with communication disorder, there will

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be negative implications on the child, the parents and the family as a whole. For instance, increased parental stress is associated with coercive parent-child interactions (Moes & Frea, 2000; Bor, Sanders, & Markie-Dadds, 2002), predicts drop-out from parent training interventions (Andra & Thomas 1998; Sanders, Markie-Dadds, Tully, & Bor, 2000; Schreibman 2000), and is linked with parental depression (Gray 2002; Vitaliano, Zhang, & Scanlan, 2003). In addition to that, heightened levels of stress can negatively influence a parent's interaction with other family members and thereby increase the risk of family maladjustment (Turnbull & Ruef, 1996).

Parents can never fully brace themselves for the news that their child is different (Pueschel, Bernier, & Weidenman, 1988). Whether the diagnosis of a disability is known after birth or in the later years, family dreams and expectations change unexpectedly. Although there are no universal reactions to the stress of raising a child with disability, several researchers have noted that there are some similar patterns or stages that the parents face emotionally (Miller, 1994). In the Indian context, disability is still viewed in terms of a misfortune. The cultural beliefs present in the society about disability plays an imperative role in influencing the way in which the family perceives the condition of the child and the kind of measures it takes for prevention, treatment and rehabilitation (Sen, 1988). Dalal and Pande (1999) in their research explored the cultural beliefs and attitudes of a rural Indian community towards physical disability. The results revealed fatalistic approaches and external dependence in families with disabled children. In the same study, the respondents also felt that the disabled member cannot do anything and just needed help and sympathy.

Various studies reveal that negative attitudes will affect the parents negatively and they often experience harmful psychological effects. Such extreme levels of stress lead to heightened negative health outcomes like depression and marital dissatisfaction. Parents of children with communication disorders are found to be emotionally unstable, experience constant grief, and psychological ill health. They are also prone to be at a higher risk for marital disputes and social seclusion. Most of the mothers of children with communication disorders also experience extreme moodiness and are more prone to illness. They are found to be intensely affected by the way their child is accepted or rejected by the society. Mothers have also described themselves as unable to pursue their personal goals and as having little free time (Holroyd, 1974), and concurrently report ambivalence and grief over the amount of time devoted to the disabled child at their own expense along with that of the family.

All parents of children with communication disorders deal with the similar tasks and demands that almost all of the parents face; however, one persistent point reported among these parents is the amount and degree of stress that they experience and the increased demands that is made by caring for the child with communication disorder. The everyday tasks of feeding, travelling, training their child is much more physically and emotionally demanding for the parents who have children with communication disorder (Ambert, 1992; Featherstone, 1980).

Having talked about stress in parents of children with communication disorders, we need to understand what stress actually means. Stress actually is a normal part of life and everyone experiences it in different degrees at various stages in life. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), one definition of stress is "a constraining force or influence such as physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor for disease causation." Stress in anybody's life can be due to wide-range of reasons like change in person's life style, job pressures, financial problems, family problems, personal loss or negative emotions (Callanan 1990; Khalsa, Azok, & Leutenberg, 1994). Stress caused by any of these factors often leads to various physical, emotional and behavioral symptoms. The most common of them seen in parents of children with communication disorders being,

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