

Stress and Coping Strategies among Parents of Intellectually Disabled Children

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Abstract

This descriptive study investigates stress levels and coping strategies among parents of children with intellectual disabilities in Anand district of Gujarat. Utilising a quantitative research method and non-probability convenience sampling, the study surveyed 100 parents from selected special schools. The results revealed that most participants were aged 36-40 years (33%), predominantly mothers (60%), with secondary education (51%) and employed (57%). The majority lived in nuclear families (60%). Stress levels were high, with 52 percent of parents experiencing severe stress and 45 percent moderate stress. Despite this, all parents employed coping mechanisms; 56 percent had adequate coping strategies, while 44 percent had moderate coping abilities. A significant positive correlation ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.05$) was found between the levels of parental stress and their coping strategies. This study highlights the substantial stress faced by parents and the various coping mechanisms employed, emphasising the need for targeted support and intervention.

Key words: Stress levels, Intellectual disabilities, Parents of intellectually disabled

Having a disabled child entails tremendous impact on parents and their families. It is estimated that approximately 150 million children worldwide are affected by various impairments. In India, between 6 to 10 percent of children are born with impairments (Dixit et al, 2019). The emphasis is on the psychological and emotional difficulties confronted by parents who must adjust to the realities of raising a child with developmental disabilities. These obstacles include dealing with increased stress and emotional distress as a result of the child's developmental performance falling short of normal growth expectations. The study tries to understand how this constant stress impacts parental well-being and the family dynamics, highlighting disparities between parents with children with disabilities and those without (De Souza et al, 2019). It also explores the multifaceted challenges faced by parents of children with special needs (SN), who often experience significant stress and disruptions in their daily lives. While the birth of a child is typically a joyous event, the arrival of a child with a disability introduces unforeseen demands that can quickly become overwhelming. These challenges impact not only the parents' stress levels but also their overall family dynamics

and daily functioning. A key focus of the study is understanding how parents' beliefs about their child's disability influence the ways they cope (Devi et al, 2019). Coping strategies vary widely, and are shaped by several factors including family size, socioeconomic status, education level, and the child's functional abilities. As primary caregivers, mothers often carry the majority of the caregiving responsibilities, which contributes to heightened stress levels compared to parents of typically developing children. This elevated stress can, in turn, affect the child's well-being and overall adjustment. Furthermore, the study references the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), which outlines the criteria for diagnosing intellectual disability, highlighting the significant emotional and practical implications such diagnoses have for both the child and their family (Arif et al, 2021).

This study explores coping as deliberate efforts to manage stress and restore balance in families raising children with special needs. Effective coping, both behavioural and cognitive, reduces stress and builds resilience. A mother's coping ability is shaped by her crisis perception, support systems, community resources, and family structure. Additionally, individual characteristics such as personality traits, spirituality, socioeconomic status, and problem-solving abilities play a significant role in how well families adjust, and

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in the effectiveness of their coping mechanisms. Understanding and addressing the underlying sources of stress is critical to managing the ongoing challenges of raising a child with special needs and promoting long-term family well-being (Upreti et al, 2016). This study sought to investigate the impact of raising a child with special needs on parental stress and coping mechanisms, with a particular focus on understanding both mothers' and fathers' strategies for managing stress. Given the significant emotional and psychological challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities, including initial shock, guilt, and ongoing stress, the study aims to fill the gap in existing research by examining the coping techniques employed by both parents. It explores how factors such as education level, social support, and family dynamics influence these coping strategies and overall parental well-being through varied experiences and needs of parents, identify support systems and interventions for improving the quality of life for families managing the child with special needs.

Objectives

This study aimed to (1) assess stress levels among parents of intellectually disabled children, (2) determine the coping strategies among parents of intellectually disabled children, (3) assess the correlation between stress level and coping strategies, and (4) find out the association between stress level and coping strategies with selected demographic variables.

Hypothesis

H1: There will be a significant correlation between the level of stress and the coping mechanisms used by parents of children with intellectual disability.

Review of Literature

Saini et al (2023) conducted a study in Meerut to assess stress levels among 40 parents of mentally retarded children in special schools, using purposive sampling and the Parental Stress Scale (PSS). Most parents were over 26 years old, and a majority of mothers had secondary-level education or were illiterate. Fathers' education levels varied, with 30 percent being graduates or post-graduates. Most mothers (95%) were homemakers, while fathers worked in diverse occupations. The majority belonged to Muslim (62.5%) and Hindu (35%) communities, lived in nuclear families (60%), and were from urban areas (65%). Over half had a monthly family income above ₹15,000 (Saini et al, 2024).

Cheng & Lai (2023) conducted a qualitative study in Italy, Australia, involving 5,169 parents of children with special educational needs. Using systematic review methods and database searches, they found that highly stressed parents should be offered stress-relief programmes, financial or employment support, and professional guidance for coping. The study recommends developing diagnosis-specific parental support programmes and further research on stress impacts across family roles.

A quantitative study was conducted by Singh & Sharma (2023) to assess the coping mechanisms of mentally restarted children in the selected school of North India. The data were collected from 250 parents using a purposive sample technique. The standardised tool was adopted, and the coping checklist was used to evaluate the coping of mentally retarded children. The result indicated that the majority of coping strategies scored 99.6 percent which was average, and the least (0.4%) scored good, but none of them had a poor coping strategy score.

Materials & Methods

One hundred parents of intellectually disabled children constituted the study population and it was set in the selected special school of Anand district (Gujarat). Non-probability, convenient sampling technique was adopted.

Data collection tools: These included demographic information, Parental Stress Scale, and Cope inventory tool. For analysis, both inferential and descriptive statistics were used.

Validity of the tool: The tool was given to 10 experts (8 in Mental Health, 2 in Child Health Nursing).

Reliability of the tool: The reliability of the tool, as established by Karl Pearson's correlation coefficient method for the parental stress scale, was " r " = 0.83, and the cope inventory r value was " r " = 0.92 for coping strategies. The tool was found to be reliable for conducting the main study. The scores indicated a high correlation, and hence the tool was considered reliable.

Ethical considerations: Formal permission was taken from the IEC, Bhai Kaka University as well as from the principal of the school. Informed consent was taken from participants with a detailed explanation of the research study. Participants were be informed about confidentiality and facility to withdraw from the study any time.

Results

The frequency and percentage distribution of demographic variables/ stress levels among

parents of intellectually disabled children / coping levels among parents of intellectually disabled children; correlation between level of stress and coping among parents and association of stress and coping strategies with selected demographic variables has been presented in Tables 1-5.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of demographic variables

Variable		F	Percentage (%)
Age of parents	26-30	14	14
	31-35	24	24
	36-40	33	33
	>40	29	29
Relationship with child	Mother	60	60
	Father	40	40
Education of parents	Primary	8	8
	Secondary	51	51
	Graduation	24	24
	Post Graduation	12	12
	Illiterate	5	5
Monthly income (Rs)	5000-10000	30	30
	10001-15000	37	37
	>15000	33	33
Family type	Joint	40	40
	Nuclear	60	60
Number of children	1 Child	25	25
	2 Child	48	48
	3 Child	23	23
	> 3 Child	4	4
Religion	Hindu	59	59
	Muslim	36	36
	Christian	1	1
	Other	4	4
Occupation	Employed	57	57
	Unemployed	43	43
Availability of support system	Relatives	53	53
	Agencies	26	26
	Social support	18	18
	Others	3	3

Table 2: Frequency and percentage distribution of stress levels among parents of intellectually disabled children (N=100)

Level of stress	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Mild Stress	3	3
Moderate Stress	45	45
Severe Stress	52	52
Total	100	100

Table 3: Frequency and percentage distribution of coping levels among parents of intellectually disabled children (N=100)

Level of coping	Frequency	Percentage
Inadequate coping	0	0
Moderate coping	44	44
Adequate coping	56	56
Total	100	100

Table 4: Correlation between level of stress and coping among parents of intellectually disabled children (N=100)

Correlation between	Correlation value	p value
Parental stress	0.49**	0.000 S
Coping		

**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

To find out the association of stress and coping strategies with selected demographic variables.

Table 5: Association of stress and coping strategies with selected demographic variables (N=100)

Variable	df	Stress level		Coping strategies	
		χ2	p value	χ2	p value
Age of parents	3	6.023	0.421-NS	9.397	0.024-S
Relationship with child	1	4.217	0.121-NS	0.974	0.217-NS
Education of parents	4	5.116	0.745-NS	4.633	0.327-NS
Monthly income	2	6.155	0.188-NS	2.225	0.329-NS
Family type	1	2.367	0.669-NS	1.271	0.530-NS
Number of children	3	10.27	0.113-NS	1.106	0.776-NS
Religion	3	15.44	0.017-S	27.63	0.000-S
Occupation	1	5.205	0.074-NS	10.38	0.001-S
Availability of support system	3	9.058	0.170-NS	20.30	0.000-S

Note: S-Significant at 5 percent level (p<0.05), NS-Not significant at 5 percent level (p>0.05), (F)= Frequency.

Discussion

The study assessed stress levels and coping strategies among parents of intellectually disabled children in selected special schools of Anand district. The findings showed that 52 percent experienced severe stress, and 56 percent had adequate coping mechanisms. A moderate positive correlation (r = 0.49, p < 0.05) indicated that higher stress was linked to increased use of coping strategies. These results align with prior studies (Saini et al, 2023; John & Gandhimathi, 2020; Singh & Lohumi, 2023), which also reported

high parental stress and generally adequate coping. Common coping mechanisms included avoidance, information seeking, and denial. The study highlights significant stress among parents, moderated by demographic factors, with many demonstrating effective coping.

A. Implications to Nursing

1. This study could bring out the unique stressors faced by parents of intellectual disability children for evolving comprehensive support and holistic care mechanisms for both the child and their family.
2. The study could identify key areas for improving nursing curricula and training to better prepare nurses for addressing the needs of families dealing with the stress of caring for children with mental disabilities.
3. Based on this study administrative policies may be developed for nurse support programmes and promoting family-centred care, enhancing patient care.

Limitation: Parents with physical or psychiatric illnesses, as well as those with substance abuse issues were excluded. Also excluded were the parents not residing in Anand city, or unavailable during the data collection period.

Recommendations

1. A large number of samples can be used for the same study.
2. The same research might be carried out using a different experimental research technique and different techniques for coping.
3. The comparative research methods might be used to carry out a study similar to this one.
4. The same study can be done in different research settings.
5. Similar research using a variety of variables may be undertaken to find further connections.

Conclusion

Based on the data, it can be concluded that a significant portion of parents, particularly those aged 36-40 and predominantly mothers, experience notable stress, with a substantial number reporting severe or moderate stress levels. Majority of parents display coping mechanisms, and there is a significant positive correlation between parental stress and coping levels, indicating that higher stress is associated with better coping strategies. Additionally, socio-demographic factors like age, religion, occupation, and support systems play a role in influencing coping levels. However, the

conclusions about specific causal relationships or the effectiveness of coping strategies relative to different socio-demographic factors should be approached with caution due to the observational nature of the data.

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