Original Article

There is Significant Stress among Parents Having Children with Autism

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess the level of parenting stress and associating factors of stress in parents rearing children with autism.

Materials and Methods: The sample included 60 parents (30 fathers, 30 mothers) of 30 children with diagnosis of autism. The sample was taken from different hospitals and institutions of mental retardation in Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Wah Cantt, Pakistan from 2005-2006. Stress in parents was measured through parental stress scale (PSS).

Results: PSS score of fathers was 46.63±7.99 and mothers 50.03±9.60 (p 0.01). Score for parents of children 4-9 years age was 50.38±7.93 and for parents of children 10-18 years age 47.13±10.26 (p 0.01). Score for parents of boys was 46.81±8.39 and for parents of girls 50.00±9.34 (p 0.01).

Conclusion: There was significant stress in parents of autistic children. Mothers experienced more stress than fathers. The level of stress was different in parents with the increasing age of the children. The implication is that mothers of children with autism are more prone to experience stress, thus requiring special attention from mental health professionals. (Rawal Med J;33:214-216).

Keywords: Parenting, stress, autism.

INTRODUCTION

Autistic disorder has been described as “a severe form of psychopathology evidenced early in childhood and characterized by severe, pervasive behavioral deficits and bizarre behavioral patterns.”1 Parents of children with developmental delays are at risk for increased levels of psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, distress, guilt, poor social and marital adjustment, less satisfaction with life, poor parent child-interaction and hopelessness.2-4 Parents of such children face more challenges in every day living to cope with different stressful events.5 They have to face more financial strain to provide necessary medical expenses, have to pay more attention to the child and parental demands increase which in turn enhance psychological strain and burden on parents.6 Mothers continue to carry the disproportionate burden in raising a disabled child, thereby being more prone to experience stress related to child care7 and often demonstrate depression, anxiety, health concerns, social isolation and low self esteem.8 In Pakistan, there has been little work on parenting stress in parents of autistic children. Consequently, it is difficult to assess the extent to which raising a child with autism affects parents. The aim of this study was to investigate level of psychological stress among parents of these children emphasizing gender differences among the parents in their level of stress.
SUBJECTS AND METHODS
The sample consisted of 60 parents (fathers=30 and mothers=30) of autistic children. The age range of parents was 25-56. The age range of children was between 4-18 years. The children were divided into two groups on the basis of their age; younger children 4-9 and older children 10-18. Only those children were selected whose both parents were alive. The sample was collected from different hospitals and institutions of mental retardation in Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Wah Cantt. Parental Stress Scale (PSS) to measure parental stress, Autism Behavior Checklist and Demographic Information Sheet were used to collect data.

RESULTS
The PSS score of mothers was significantly higher than fathers (Table 1).

Table 1. PSS score of parents (N =60).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Mean±SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46.63±7.99</td>
<td>2.194**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50.03±9.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The parents having younger children had higher levels of stress as compared to parents of older children (Table 2).

Table 2. PSS score parents of younger and older children (N =60).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Mean±SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger Children</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50.38±7.93</td>
<td>2.281**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Children</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>47.13±10.26</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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The parents having boy-child had comparatively lower levels of stress than parents having girl-child (Table 3).

Table 3. PSS score of parents of boy-child and girl-child (N =60).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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</thead>
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DISCUSSION
Special child care demands faced by parents of children with disabilities cause significant stress for parents and disruption in family relationships. There is substantial evidence that the challenges faced by parents and the ways in which they deal with them vary with the nature of the child’s disability. Higher rates of depressive symptoms and feelings of increased psychological distress have been reported by mothers of children with chronic illness or disabling conditions in many studies. Our study showed differential experiences for parents depending upon developmental disability. The possible explanation regarding the high level of stress in parents could be that autism is a pervasive developmental disorder so autistic children have more severe form of disability. Moreover children with autism display features such as impulsivity, hyperactivity, irritability, and aggressiveness, which are characterized by unpredictability and volatility.

Our results indicate that mothers experienced more stress as compared to fathers. Women have been reported to be more vulnerable than men to stressful events. These gender differences in level of stress can be interpreted as evidence for gender role socialization of emotions. Usually, in our culture, males are expected to suppress their emotions. Since mothers have primary responsibility for child care and are, thus, more subject to the challenges associated with their disability.

Age of the child has been considered an important factor in contributing mental health problems of parents. In a cross-sectional study, it was found that parental stress was higher in middle and late childhood than during the early childhood and there was decrease in parental psychological well being with increased age of the child, from childhood through adolescence. The present study found parents of younger children had lower stress level. The more logical explanation for this difference can be that as the child grows older, family stress increases as parents develop a more realistic view of child’s future and outcome. With the increasing age, care demands as well as behavioral problems of the disabled children increase which can contribute to low parental well being.

The parents of girl-child had higher PSS score as they experienced more stress as compared to parents of boy-child. The boy-child behavioral characteristics may be a possible reason for this. These finding may have greater significance in our culture, as parents of girl-child are more worried about their future. With the increasing age of the girls it becomes difficult to manage them. Their sex and menarche issues are stressful for parents, as they have to spend more time with their daughters and have to provide more care to them. In conclusion, we found higher level of stress in parents of children with autism. The stress was more in mothers, higher when children were younger in age and was more in case of girls. There is dire need to further explore impact of developmental disabilities on parents and their mental health problems, which will have clinical relevance for therapeutic intervention with parents and families at risk.
REFERENCES