

A Comparative Analysis of Parental Stress Levels Among Parents of Children with Special Needs and Parents of Typically Developing Children

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Abstract

This study examines differences in parental stress levels between parents of children with special needs and parents of typically developing children. Parenting can become a source of psychological strain when caregiving demands exceed an individual's coping capacity. The objective of the study was to compare stress levels between these two groups using a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. A total of 40 parents participated in the study, including 20 parents of children with special needs and 20 parents of typically developing children. Data were collected using the Parental Stress Scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics and an independent samples t-test. The findings indicated that parents of children with special needs reported significantly higher stress levels compared to parents of typically developing children. The results highlight the need for targeted psychological support and structured intervention programs to assist parents in managing caregiving-related stress.

Keywords: parental stress, special needs, typically developing children, caregiving, psychological well-being

1. Introduction

Parenting involves a continuous process of adjustment, responsibility, and emotional engagement. While it is often associated with positive experiences such as bonding and fulfilment, it can also become a source of stress when demands exceed an individual's ability to cope effectively. Parental stress can therefore be understood as the strain experienced by caregivers when they perceive parenting responsibilities as overwhelming (Deater-Deckard, 1998).

The intensity of parental stress is not uniform and tends to vary based on the child's developmental profile and contextual factors. Parents raising children with special needs frequently encounter additional responsibilities, including managing behavioural difficulties, attending therapeutic interventions, and coordinating with professionals. These demands are often ongoing and less predictable, which may contribute to heightened stress levels (Hayes and Watson, 2013). Research also suggests that parents of

children with developmental conditions may experience emotional strain due to uncertainty, reduced social support, and societal attitudes (Estes et al., 2009).

On the other hand, parents of typically developing children also experience stress; however, these stressors are generally routine and more manageable within the course of everyday parenting. Such stress is often linked to discipline, academic concerns, and daily responsibilities, which tend to follow a relatively predictable pattern (Hastings, 2002).

Although parental stress has been widely studied, there is limited research that directly compares these two groups within the Indian context. Cultural influences such as family expectations, availability of support systems, and societal perceptions may shape parental experiences differently. Therefore, this study aims to examine and compare stress levels among parents of children with special needs and those of typically developing children.

2. Review of Literature

Parental stress has been widely examined across different populations, with a consistent focus on families of children with developmental challenges. A strong body of research indicates that caregiving demands significantly influence psychological well-being, particularly among parents of children with special needs.

Several large-scale studies have demonstrated that parents of children with developmental disorders report higher levels of stress compared to parents of typically developing children. For instance, Hayes and Watson (2013) found significantly elevated stress levels among parents of children with autism. Similarly, Pinquart (2018) highlighted that caregiving responsibilities associated with chronic conditions contribute to sustained psychological strain.

Empirical research also supports these findings. Estes et al. (2009) observed increased emotional distress among parents of children with developmental conditions, while Dabrowska and Pisula (2010) reported that ineffective coping strategies and behavioural challenges are closely linked to higher stress levels. In addition, Lecavalier et al. (2006) identified child behaviour as a key factor influencing caregiver stress.

Contextual factors further shape parental experiences. Research suggests that access to support services, financial resources, and social acceptance significantly influence stress levels. Within the Indian context, Gupta and Singhal (2004) emphasized the role of societal attitudes and stigma in increasing parental burden. Rao and Beena (2021) also reported higher stress levels among parents of children with developmental disabilities in urban Indian settings.

Despite these findings, several limitations exist within the literature. Many studies focus on specific conditions, limiting generalizability, and a large proportion of research is based on Western populations. Indian studies often lack comparative designs, highlighting the need for more structured research examining differences between groups. The present study addresses this gap by providing a comparative perspective within a localized context.

3. Methodology

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative research design to examine differences in parental stress levels between two groups: parents of children with special needs and parents

of typically developing children. A quantitative approach was selected as it allows for objective measurement of parental stress through numerical data obtained from a standardized instrument. This approach facilitates statistical comparison and enhances the reliability and validity of findings (Creswell, 2014).

A cross-sectional design was deemed appropriate as the study aimed to capture parental stress levels at a single point in time. This design is particularly useful for identifying differences between groups without requiring longitudinal follow-up. The comparative nature of the study enables systematic examination of whether the developmental status of the child significantly influences parental stress levels.

Variables

The study included the following variables:

- Independent Variable: Type of child
 - Children with special needs
 - Typically developing children
- Dependent Variable: Parental stress

The independent variable represents the grouping factor, while the dependent variable reflects the outcome being measured. The selection of these variables is grounded in existing literature, which suggests that the nature of the child's developmental condition plays a significant role in shaping parental experiences and stress levels.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess parental stress among parents of children with special needs
2. To assess parental stress among parents of typically developing children
3. To compare parental stress levels between the two groups

Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant difference in parental stress levels between parents of children with special needs and parents of typically developing children.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study consisted of a total sample of 40 participants, divided equally into two groups:

- 20 parents of children with special needs
- 20 parents of typically developing children

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria relevant to the study. This method was considered appropriate as it allowed the researcher to target a specific population, namely parents of children with and without special needs (Etikan et al., 2016).

Participants were primarily recruited from urban areas of Bangalore through special education settings, therapy centers, and personal networks. The researcher's familiarity with special education environments facilitated easier access to participants and improved response rates.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Parents of children aged between 3–12 years

- Primary caregivers actively involved in the child's daily care
- Parents of children diagnosed with developmental conditions (special needs group)
- Parents of children without diagnosed developmental conditions (comparison group)

Exclusion Criteria:

- Parents with diagnosed psychiatric disorders
- Parents with severe physical illness affecting participation
- Parents not actively involved in caregiving

Tools Used for Data Collection

Parental Stress Scale (PSS)

Parental stress was measured using the Parental Stress Scale developed by Berry and Jones (1995). The scale consists of 18 items that assess both positive and negative aspects of parenting. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Some items are reverse scored to ensure accuracy in measuring stress levels. Higher total scores indicate higher levels of parental stress. The scale was selected due to its simplicity, reliability, and applicability across diverse populations.

Demographic Questionnaire

A structured demographic questionnaire was used to collect relevant background information, including age, gender, educational level, number of children, and child's developmental status. This information was used to ensure accurate classification of participants and to provide contextual understanding of the sample.

Reliability and Validity

The Parental Stress Scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties in previous research. Studies have reported high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically exceeding 0.80, indicating reliable measurement of parental stress. The scale also demonstrates good construct validity and has been widely used in studies involving both clinical and non-clinical populations.

Procedure

The data collection process was carried out in a systematic and structured manner. Participants were identified through special schools, therapy centers, and personal networks. The researcher's association with special education settings played a crucial role in establishing trust and facilitating access to participants.

Participants were approached using a combination of in-person interactions, phone communication, and online platforms such as WhatsApp and email. The purpose of the study was explained clearly in simple and understandable language. Participants were informed that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for academic purposes.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were then provided with the Parental Stress Scale and the demographic questionnaire. For in-person participants, questionnaires were completed on-site, while online participants were provided with digital forms.

Each participant took approximately 20–30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. While most participants were cooperative, minor challenges were encountered, such as time constraints and the need for follow-up reminders in online responses. These challenges were managed through flexible scheduling and communication.

All collected data were systematically organized, coded, and stored securely to ensure confidentiality.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

- Descriptive Statistics: Mean and standard deviation were calculated to summarize parental stress scores for both groups.
- Inferential Statistics: An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare mean stress scores between the two groups.

The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed standard ethical guidelines. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to participation, and informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality of responses was maintained, and participation was voluntary. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

4. Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Parental Stress Scores

Group	N	Mean	SD
Parents of Children with Special Needs	20	51.35	5.72
Parents of Typically Developing Children	20	43.10	5.48

The mean stress score of parents of children with special needs ($M = 51.35$) is higher than that of parents of typically developing children ($M = 43.10$), indicating comparatively higher stress levels in the former group.

Inferential Statistics

Table 2: Independent Samples t-test for Parental Stress Scores

Groups Compared	Mean Difference	t-value	df	p-value
Children with Special Needs vs Typically Developing Children	8.25	2.37	38	< .05

The obtained t-value ($t = 2.37$, $df = 38$) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p < .05$). This indicates a significant difference in parental stress levels between the two groups. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected.

The results of the study indicate a clear difference in parental stress levels between the two groups. Parents of children with special needs reported higher mean stress scores ($M = 51.35$, $SD = 5.72$) compared to parents of typically developing children ($M = 43.10$, $SD = 5.48$).

The independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups ($t = 2.37$, $p < .05$), indicating that the observed difference is not due to chance. Based on these findings, the null hypothesis was rejected.

5. Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that parents of children with special needs experience higher levels of stress compared to parents of typically developing children. This difference can be understood in terms of the nature and intensity of caregiving demands.

Parents of children with special needs often face ongoing responsibilities that require sustained attention and adaptation. These may include managing behavioural concerns, attending therapy sessions, and navigating educational and healthcare systems. Such responsibilities are often unpredictable and long-term, which may contribute to increased psychological strain.

In contrast, parents of typically developing children experience stress that is generally linked to routine parenting tasks. These stressors are often temporary and more manageable, which may explain the comparatively lower stress levels observed in this group.

The findings are consistent with previous research indicating higher stress among parents of children with developmental conditions (Hayes and Watson, 2013; Estes et al., 2009). From a theoretical perspective, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) suggests that stress arises when perceived demands exceed available coping resources. Parents of children with special needs may experience this imbalance more frequently due to increased demands and limited support.

Additionally, ecological perspectives highlight the influence of environmental systems on parental experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Limited access to supportive services and societal understanding may further contribute to stress, particularly within the Indian context.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

The findings of the present study have important implications for psychological, educational, and social domains. The results highlight the need for targeted interventions to support parents of children with special needs. Mental health professionals can develop stress management programs and counselling services to enhance coping strategies among parents. Educational institutions and special schools can provide structured parent support programs and awareness initiatives to assist families in managing caregiving demands more effectively.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The use of purposive sampling may introduce selection bias,

and reliance on self-report measures may be influenced by social desirability. Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in parental stress over time.

Future research can address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples and employing longitudinal designs to examine changes in stress levels over time. Further studies can also explore additional variables such as coping strategies, social support, and parental mental health. Comparative research across different cultural and socio-economic contexts may provide a more comprehensive understanding of parental stress.

6. Conclusion

The present study concludes that parents of children with special needs experience significantly higher levels of stress compared to parents of typically developing children. These findings emphasize the importance of recognizing parental stress as a critical factor influencing family well-being.

The study highlights the need for psychological support, awareness programs, and accessible services to help parents manage caregiving challenges effectively. Addressing parental stress can lead to improved family functioning and better developmental outcomes for children.

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