

Impact of Having an Autistic Child on Parental Stress and General Self-Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Children with developmental disabilities occupy a niche area in research literature. This has enabled us to have an in depth understanding into their condition and the problems they face. However, an often-overlooked component of disability is the effect that it has on the family as a unit. Caring for a child with a disability is a taxing task which can strain the physical and psychological resources of their caretakers or their parents. The present study is aimed at understanding the differences in parental stress and general self-efficacy among parents with and without autistic children. It further tries to predict these factors on the basis of the presence of an autistic child. The study was conducted on 70 parents distributed equally based on the presence and absence of autism in their child. The parental stress scale and general self-efficacy scale were used and it was found that self-efficacy is lower and parental stress is higher among parents with Autistic children. The study also concluded that higher parental stress and lower self-efficacy is predicted by the presence of an Autistic child.

Keywords: *Autism, General self-efficacy, Parental stress*

In the tapestry of life, human beings occupy a beautiful place for we are connected by a unique bond that weaves us together. The social nature of humanity means that much of an individual's identity and the roles that they perform are significant to the wider scope of existence itself. Human life from birth to senescence is a dynamic process with changing social roles and expectations. A significant mile stone in the life of an individual is in middle adulthood wherein they take up the role of parents. Parents are vital in the development of children and in creating a generation of youth who are able to hold their own against a tough world. However, becoming parents can inherently be a task which is wrought with much uncertainty and chaos.

Parenting refers to the unique upbringing process in which parents equip their children to be independent individuals who contribute to the society. It not only refers to the biological relationship but also to the handholding process by which parents provide children with the necessary physical, emotional, social, and intellectual resources to unfold their true potential. Various studies on parenting styles over the ages have found that it plays an

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important role in child development. As the child moves from infancy to adulthood, the nature of parenting changes as well from being active to more passive. The parent-child bond is a sacred one which has immense significance to the life of both the child and the parents as individuals themselves.

Parental stress is one of the common roadblocks to a good parent-child relationship which if not resolved appropriately can lead to much distress for both the child and the parent. Parental stress has been defined as the stress that develops out of the perception of parents regarding the existence of an imbalance between the parental demands and resource availability (Lyons, & Giardino, 2010) in regards to the upbringing of their children. Parents with higher parental stress are found to face many issues including poor psychological well-being, decreased marital quality and marital satisfaction, expression of negative parental behaviours and experiencing more negative affect than positive ones. These individual effects on the parents can also have a detrimental influence on children as it has been revealed that children of parents with higher parental stress have poorer cognitive skills and higher internalising-externalising problems along with interpersonal difficulties. Thus, better control and management of parental stress is necessary to improve the quality of life of both the parents and the children. Parental mindfulness has been promoted by many in order to support and lighten the parental stress occurring within the parental population (Campbell et. al, 2017).

The extent of parental stress has been discovered to be higher among the parents with children having developmental disorders (Ilias, 2018) which comprises of a whole lot of disorders like Autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, Down's syndrome, Cerebral palsy, Fragile X syndrome, Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders etc. As developmental disorders remain relatively consistent throughout the lifespan of the child with very little possibility of improvement, it can become a major source of chronic stress for parents. This is essentially due to the fact that parents are placed in a situation wherein they have to take care of an extremely vulnerable individual unable to care for themselves with little respite. A persistence of such a condition may deplete all the physical and psychological resources the parent possess and percolate into other roles and areas of their lives.

Autism spectrum disorder, earlier known as pervasive developmental disorder refers to a heterogenous group of neurodevelopmental syndromes that effect the brain and development accompanied with persistent challenges in social interaction, speech and nonverbal communication, in addition to restricted or repetitive behaviours. The severity and extent of disability among Autism patients varies, it can be expressed as a continuum in a spectrum where the milder version forms one end, and the extreme bed-ridden cases take up the other end. Parents having children with greater severity of Autism can be expected to face greater difficulty in playing their role as parents than those with children on the lower end of the spectrum.

One of the innate abilities people possess which helps them cope with the demands of life is self-efficacy. It is an optimistic belief of an individual about their potential to face lives challenges, overcome them and taste the sweetness of success. Self-efficacy can be considered to be one of the important individual strengths that parents of children with developmental disorder make use of in order to cope with the life stress they face consistently. A comparative study of general self-efficacy and parental stress between parents having children with and without Autism has thus been the major topic of concern

for the present study. The study also attempts to find the extent of predictability of self-efficacy and parental stress among parents having Autistic children.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Researchers have always been keen on studying developmental disorders and developing coping strategies to improve the quality of life of individuals suffering from them. A number of developmental disorders have been the focus of study for ages particularly autism spectrum disorders. The concern regarding the same has primarily focused on those with the disorder and often ignores the impact on those close to the individual. Researches related to them remain important and are still in the process development.

Ilias et al (2018) studied parenting stress and resilience in parents of children with autism spectrum disorder in southeast Asia and the study suggested that there could be six factors: social support, severity of autism symptoms, financial difficulty, parents' perception and understanding toward ASD, parents' anxiety and worries about their child's future, and religious beliefs which could be considered as cause for parental stress, coping or resilience mechanism. Gupta and Singal (2005) were one among the comparatively early researchers who studied depression, stress and anxiety among parents with Autistic children. The study revealed that such parents were at a higher risk to develop such traits than parents of normal children. They were also able to ascertain that mothers of Autistic children were more expressive about their condition while fathers were more likely to suppress their emotion. Similar result were pointed out by Fido and Saad (2013), Zhou et al (2019), as well as Sabih and Sajid (2008). In addition to this the latter also suggested that the intensity of stress varies within the parents based upon the age of their Autistic child. Fazizi et al (2014) focused on the type of dysfunction and revealed that mothers of children with sensory-motor and chronic physical problems suffered from greater levels of stress than those with children having psychological disorders. Nikmat, Ahmad, Oon, and Razali (2008) conducted a related study in which they focused on the psychological well-being of parents with Autistic children and it was revealed that 53.8% of parents showed clinical disturbance in their psychological wellbeing. Likewise, similar studies by Rezendes and Scarpa (2011) as well as Melli, Grossi, Zarbo, and Compare (2016) revealed that there is an increased parental stress and lowered self-efficacy among parents of autistic children. It also indicated that parental stress mediated child behaviour problems as well as parental anxiety or depression. In addition to this, through the study reports of Zhou et al (2019) a positive correlation was observed between autistic symptoms of children to depression and anxiety in mothers.

Gupta and Singal (2005) were also interested in improving the conditions of such parents and suggested that a positive perception about their condition instead of the being burdened with guilt and shame could bring about tremendous changes in their well-being Dąbrowska (2008) studied the sense of coherence and coping in 128 fathers of children with developmental disabilities and it was observed that there is no difference in the global sense of coherence in fathers of ASD and normal children. However, it was observed that fathers with low levels of sense of coherence made use of avoidance oriented coping strategy, while those with high levels of sense of coherence used confrontation, positive reappraisal and planful problem solving. Tajrishi et al (2015) conducted a problem focused strategy on mothers of children with Down's syndrome and the post-test responses indicated that they were highly effective. Malay Das (2011) also tried to assess the ways to enhance coping in parents of Autistic children and it was concluded that organized parental support groups, parental education and psychological counselling via special schools did much to alleviate their distress. The same concept was put forward by the study reports of Tripathi (2015)

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about parents of Autistic children. The present study tries to understand the impact of having an autistic child on parents and thereby help professionals to adopt efficient techniques to cope with these issues on the basis of general self-efficacy and parental stress.

Need and significance of the study

Differently blessed is a phrase commonly used in connection with the differently abled for indeed they are a blessing to humanity, giving us a glimpse into a rare strength and an innocent yet unique perspective of reality. Trying to understand their private world can at times be disheartening and frustrating for their loved ones. Many parents struggle to do right by their differently abled children wanting to give them the best yet not knowing if they are doing enough. The present study hopes to enhance the understanding of the stress that parents of children with autism face and examine the influence of self-efficacy on this stress. The ability to predict parental stress and self-efficacy in relation to having an autistic child gives us an overview into what we can expect in such scenario. This helps us be better prepared to provide parents with necessary support so as to safeguard the parent-child relationship and ensure a better quality of life for both the parents and their differently abled child. Attempts can be made to enhance the self-efficacy of parents so that they may feel a greater sense of control over their lives and reduce their stress levels significantly. Thus, an understanding of these factors both in oneself and other parents will foster a sense of solidarity, a feeling that one is not alone and that it is acceptable to feel the way they do. The study also aims to build a base up on which researchers may further explore the impact of various factors like the level of education, gender of parent, socioeconomic status, gender of child with autism, number of children with autism in a family, etc. upon the same. An in depth understanding of the situation will enable the formulation of practically feasible effective interventions, strategies and techniques to ensure the well-being of parents with children having autism.

Objective

The major objective of the study is to understand the differences in parental stress and general self-efficacy among parents with and without Autistic children and to predict the extent of parental stress and general self-efficacy among these parents.

Hypotheses

- There exists no significant relation between parental stress and general self- efficacy among urban middle-class parents.
- There exists no significant difference in parental stress among parents with and without Autistic children.
- There exists no significant difference in general self-efficacy among parents with and without Autistic children.
- Having an autistic child is not a predictor of parental stress.
- Having an autistic child is not a predictor of parent's general self-efficacy.

Limitation

The study was conducted staying within the constraints of time and the situation of the covid-19 pandemic. The sample considered for the study was taken from Irinjalakuda municipality and consisted of only 70 parents.

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Sample

The target population of the study was 70 parents of two distinct categories, of which included 35 parents with autistic children and 35 parents with children not under the Autism spectrum. All the parents were from urban, well-educated, middle-class family backgrounds. Data was collected from various autism centres and schools near Irinjalakuda town of Kerala.

Instruments

Two measures were used in this study,

- **The parental stress scale:** The parental stress scale developed by Barry and Jones 1995 has been used as an alternative for parenting stress index that was long and hard to administer in a non-clinical set up. The tool used is a self-administered 18 item questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Personal development, emotional benefits, restrictions and demands on resources are the common negative and positive aspects on which the scale has been constructed. The scale also has well established psychometric properties including a test-retest reliability of .81 and internal reliability of .83. The content and construct validity for the scale has also been clearly standardized using different research studies.
- **General self-efficacy scale:** The other scale used for the study was the general self-efficacy scale developed by Ralf Schwarzer and Matthias Jerusalem in 1981. It is one of the most commonly used and established scales to measure general self-efficacy consisting of 10-items with a 4-point Likert scale ranging from not at all true to exactly true. It has a good content and construct validity with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from .76 to .90.

Procedure

Convenient sampling method was used for collecting data from parents with and without autistic children. The selected group of parents were administered with the general self-efficacy scale and parental stress scale. Further the collected data was scored appropriately to undergo statistical analysis. Statistical tools such as correlation and independent sample t-test were used to determine the influence of having an autistic child on parental stress and general self-efficacy and to understand the relationship between these variables. Simple linear regression was used to predict the influence of having an autistic child upon these individual factors. The analysed statistical results were systematically interpreted further to obtain meaningful insights.

The objective of the present investigation was to understand the influence of having a child with autism on parental stress and general self-efficacy among urban middle-class parents. The study also tries to predict parental stress and general self-efficacy on the basis of presence of an autistic child. Pearson's correlation was used to determine the relation between parental stress and general self-efficacy. Independent sample t-test was used to determine the influence of having an autistic child on parental stress and general efficacy. Simple linear regression was used in the study to predict the occurrence of parental stress and general efficacy as a result of having a child coming under the autism spectrum. The results obtained have been further interpreted to draw meaningful conclusions.

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Table No. 1 Pearson's Correlation Between Parental stress and General self-efficacy

	Mean	SD	1	2
1, Parental stress	39.99	7.91	-	
2, General self-efficacy	30.51	5.104	-0.317**	-

N=70. **p <.01

To assess the relationship between parental stress and general self-efficacy, Pearson's correlation was performed. Table 1 concludes that there exists a negative relationship between parental stress and general self-efficacy ($r(70) = -0.317^{**}$, $p = .001$), such that higher general self-efficacy (Mean = 39.99, SD = 7.91) implies lower parental stress (Mean = 30.51, SD = 5.104) and vice versa. The correlation result concludes that there is a moderately strong relationship between parental stress and general self-efficacy. Earlier works also show that, an individual's parental stress is inversely proportional to general self-efficacy, which indicates that the increase in general self-efficacy of a parent will dramatically reduce the parental stress.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test of Parental stress among parents with and without autistic children

Parent	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig.	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
With autistic child	35	34.34	4.62	8.52	0.001	11.29	13.93	8.64
Without autistic child	35	45.63	6.33					

Table 2 shows the mean value of parental stress among parents with an autistic child (N= 35, M= 34.34, SD= 4.62) and parents without an autistic child (N= 35, M= 45.63, SD= 6.33). To test the hypothesis that there exists no statistically significant difference in parental stress among parents who have an autistic child and those who do not have an autistic child, an independent sample t-test was conducted. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was done and satisfied via Levene's F test' ($F(68) = 2.654$, $p = 0.14$). The variation among parents with and without an autistic child was tested and revealed to be statistically significant, $t(68) = 8.52$, $p = .001$. It is clear from the data that having an autistic child plays an important role on parental stress, as parents who have an autistic child show higher parental stress than parents who do not have an autistic child. Previous studies have also revealed similar results (Feizi et al, 2014; Smith et al, 2001).

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Table 3: Descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test of general self-efficacy among parents with and without autistic children

Parent	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig.	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
With autistic child	35	32.26	4.68	3.02	0.004	3.48	1.18	5.78
Without autistic child	35	28.77	4.96					

Table 3 shows the mean value of general self-efficacy among parents with an autistic child (N= 35, M= 32.26, SD= 4.68) and parents without an autistic child (N= 35, M= 28.77, SD= 4.96). To test the hypothesis that there exists no statistically significant difference in general self-efficacy among parents who have an autistic child and those who do not have an autistic child, an independent sample t-test was conducted. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was tested and satisfied via Levene's F test" (F (68) = 1.39, p = 0.241). The variation among the parents with and without an autistic child on general self-efficacy was tested and revealed to be statistically significant, t (68) = 3.02, p= .004. It is clear from the data that having an autistic child plays an important role on general self-efficacy of parents, as parents who have an autistic child show lower general self-efficacy than parents who do not have an autistic child. Earlier studies have also found the similar relations (Hohlfeld et al, 2018; Whiting et al, 2019).

Table 4: Simple linear regression between parents with and without autistic child and parental stress

Variables	R	R ²	Change R ²	β	F value	Sig.
X = Parental stress						
Y = Parents with and without autistic children	0.719	0.516	0.509	11.285	72.587	0.001

To determine the ability to predict parental stress on the basis of having an autistic child, simple linear regression was conducted. A substantial regression equation was discovered (F (1.69) = 72.587, p=.001), with an R² of 0.516 between parents with and without an autistic child and parental stress. Predicted stress of parents was equal to 34.343 + 11.286 where they were coded as 0 = Parents without an autistic child, 1 = Parents with an autistic child. For parents with an autistic child, the parental stress is expected to be 11.286 units higher than parents without an autistic child. The analysis has concluded that having an autistic child can be a predictor parental stress with up to 51.6% accuracy.

Table 5: Simple linear regression between parents with and without autistic child and general self-efficacy

Variables	R	R ²	Change R ²	β	F value	Sig.
X = General self-efficacy						
Y = Parents with and without autistic children	0.344	0.118	0.105	3.485	9.123	0.004

To determine the ability to predict general self-efficacy on the basis of having an autistic child, simple linear regression was conducted. A substantial regression equation was discovered ($F(1,69) = 9.123, p=.004$), with an R^2 of 0.118 between parents with and without an autistic child and general self-efficacy. Predicted general self-efficacy of parents was equal to $32.257 + 3.486$, where they were coded as 0 = Parents without an autistic child, 1 = Parents with an autistic child. General self-efficacy of parents with an autistic child is 3.486 units lower than parents without an autistic child. The analysis has concluded that having an autistic child can be a predictor of general self-efficacy with up to 11.8% accuracy.

Hence, from the entire analysis it is clearly evident that parents who have an autistic child have significantly lower general self-efficacy and higher parental stress than those parents who do not have an autistic child. It is also clear that having an autistic child is a predictor of higher parental stress and lower self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

The research concluded that having an autistic child will result in higher parental stress and lower general self-efficacy. It is also revealed that having an autistic child predicts more towards parental stress than towards the general self-efficacy. Parents with an autistic child should be given more attention and support by the society as it can help to build a much more well-rounded social structure. Moreover, interventions programmes to enhance general self-efficacy could act to reduce parental stress.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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