

Effects of Parental Support Group on Perceived Stress and Self-Esteem among Parents of Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

Parents are the fundamental and most important connection in the care, education, and supervision of children with special needs. When parenting a special child, they face many challenges, including tremendous physical and psychological concerns associated with child care and unprecedented stress. The present study aims to assess the effects of parental support groups on the self-esteem and perceived stress of parents of children with special needs. A cross-sectional study was conducted, and data from 100 parents of children with special needs was collected through convenience sampling using Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, et al., 1983) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1989). The results showed that parents who were a part of parental support groups had better self-esteem but higher perceived stress. t-test showed a significant difference in self-esteem in relation to membership of parental support groups ($t=2.127$, $p=0.03$). However, there was no significant difference in perceived stress in reference to membership of parental support groups ($t=1.575$, $p=0.119$). Pearson's correlation showed a statistically significant association ($r=0.611$) between self-esteem and perceived stress at 0.01 levels. There is an urgent need for medical, psychological, and educational professionals to provide family-based interventions to assist parents raising a child with a disability.

Keywords: *Perceived Stress, Self-Esteem, Children with Special Needs, Parental Support Group*

Children with disabilities are common and increasing as more children survive globally. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015), roughly one in every 33 babies is born with a birth defect, and approximately one in every six children is born with a developmental disability. Developmental disabilities are a range of conditions characterised by disability in one or more of the following areas: physical, learning, language, or behaviour. These problems appear during the developmental period, can interfere with daily functioning, and usually last a person's entire life.

Parents are the core and most important link in the care, education, and supervision of children with special needs; as a result, they face huge physical and psychological

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Received: August 30, 2022; Revision Received: October 29, 2022; Accepted: November 11, 2022

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challenges associated with child care and face unparalleled stress (Joseph & Chacko, 2019). When raising a special child, they encounter a slew of new challenges. Parental duties are frequently reinterpreted and can constitute a significant challenge and stress for parents, particularly when assistance is inadequate or non-existent. Parents of special children face new and unfamiliar obstacles that reshape their traditional roles as advocates, medical caregivers, and organizers of structured activities. Financial problems, marital strife, and social isolation can all be sources of stress for parents (Cauda-Laufer, 2017).

Stress is the psychological and physical state that occurs when an individual's resources are insufficient to deal with the situation's demands and pressures. As a result, stress is more likely in some situations than others, and in some people than others. COVID-19 has had an impact on the mental health of parents of special needs children. During the COVID-19 outbreak, parents of special needs children had mental and behavioural issues, as well as parenting stress and social support, which influenced their state anxiety. According to some recent study, parenting children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can be a stressful experience. Individual, familial, and cultural variables all have a role in dealing with and coping with pressures. Parents' levels of anxiety varied greatly depending on their educational background, family monthly income, and the nature of their child's condition (Ren, et al., 2020).

According to research, parents of children with special needs are more stressed, have a higher risk of mental health problems, and have lower well-being than parents of typically developing children (Benson, 2012; Trute et al., 2007). According to Saeed's (2020) research, the gender of the kid, age of diagnosis, kind of school the child attends, parents' gender, age of parents and child, marital status, and number of special children in the household all experience substantial levels of stress during COVID -19. Among various types of strategies to mitigate the level of stress experienced by the parents, engaging in activities with their children was the most effective. Additionally, factors such as area of residence, low socio-economic status, knowledge of the disability of one's child, low confidence in managing the special child, increased perceived burden of care and having no sources for psychological support play a significant role in the prevalence of psychological distress among the parents for children with disabilities (Mwale, et al., 2018).

Parents of children with special needs experience moderate to severe parental stress, irrespective of gender (Joseph and Chacko, 2019). The parents with high anxiety were four times more likely to have high perceived stress (Jose, 2018). There is a significant difference parenting stress level in mothers of children with various problems such as sensory-motor mental problems, chronic physical problems, and psychological disorders (Feizi et al., 2014).

Self-esteem is linked to human health and psychological well-being (Rosenberg, 1965). This effect might be regarded as an increase in the scope of resources and active coping with life's issues. Furthermore, regardless of the conditions, there appears to be a considerable anti-stress influence on self-esteem (Pruessner et al., 1999).

Researchers have found that the father's parenting stress had a partner effect on the mother's self-esteem. In contrast, the mother's self-esteem affected her parent-child interaction, which affected the child's self-esteem (Won & Hun-Ha, 2020). Moreover, parents of children with

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autism spectrum disorder are more likely to have mental health problems than parents whose children have an intellectual disability or a visual or hearing impairment (Chen et al., 2020). The present study aims to assess the effects of parental support groups on the self-esteem and stress management of parents/caregivers of children with special needs.

Objectives

- To study the stress level among parents of children with special needs.
- To study the difference in perceived stress among parents who are a part of a parental support group and parents who are not part of any parental support group.
- To study the self-esteem of parents of children with special needs.
- To study the difference in self-esteem among parents who are a part of a parental support group and parents who are not part of any parental support group.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design and participants

A cross-sectional study was conducted from October - December 2021. The sample of this study was parents of children with special needs. A total of 100 parents (50% of parents were a part of the parental support group and 50% were not part of any parental support group) of children with special needs (90% with Autism and 10% with other disabilities) were selected through the convenience sampling method.

Tools

For this study, data was collected using Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, et al., 1983) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1989).

- **Perceived Stress Scale** is one of the most widely disseminated methods of assessing psychological stress. This self-report scale generates a global stress score that is based on general questions rather than focusing on specific experiences. It is the most widely used psychological instrument for measuring the perception of stress. It measures the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. Items were designed to tap how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives. The scale also includes several direct queries about current levels of experienced stress. PSS scores are obtained by reversing responses (e.g., 0 = 4, 1 = 3, 2 = 2, 3 = 1 & 4 = 0) to the four positively stated items (items 4, 5, 7, & 8) and then summing across all scale items.
- **Self-esteem Scale** is a 10-item self-report measure with a 4-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. High scores indicate high self-esteem, whereas low scores indicate low self-esteem. Cronbach's alpha for various samples range between .77-.88 and test-retest correlations between .82-.88 (Rosenberg, 1989).

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistical analyses were performed to analyze the data collected from the participants. Continuous variables were presented in the form of mean (\pm sd) and categorical variables were presented as number (%). t test was used to compare the mean of two groups. A *p* value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant. All statistical analyses were performed using statistical software SPSS (version 20.0).

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RESULTS

The mean age of the participants of this study was 38.3 (SD=6.15) years. 82% (n=82) of the participants were females and 18% (n=18) were males. 96% (n=96) of parents looked after one child with special needs, and 4% (n=4) had two children with special needs. Further, the most of the participants i.e., 58% (n=58) were postgraduates, 30% (n=30) were graduates, 6% (n=6) were Ph.D. holders, 4% (n=4) were diploma holders and 2% (n=2) were having M.Phil. as an educational qualification. Further, 34% (n=34) parents were homemakers, 23% (n=23) were working professionals, 13% (n=13) were teachers, 8% (n=8) were special educators, 8% (n=8) were in government job, 8% (n=8) were businessmen and 6% (n=6) were doctors.

Table 1: Demographic details of the participants

Variables		Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	<i>Female</i>	82	82.0
	<i>Male</i>	18	18.0
Qualification	<i>Postgraduate</i>	58	58.0
	<i>Graduate</i>	30	30.0
	<i>Ph.D.</i>	06	6.0
	<i>Diploma</i>	04	4.0
	<i>M. Phil.</i>	02	2.0
Profession	<i>Homemaker</i>	34	34.0
	<i>Professional</i>	23	23.0
	<i>Teacher</i>	13	13.0
	<i>Special educator</i>	08	8.0
	<i>Government job</i>	08	8.0
	<i>Businessmen</i>	08	8.0
	<i>Doctor</i>	06	6.0

Perceived Stress

Participants of this study scored 18.53 (SD=6.07) on the perceived stress scale. Among all the participants, 8% (n=8) had a high level of stress, 21% (n=21) had a low-stress level, and 71% (n=71) had a moderate stress level on the perceived stress scale (Table 2). The result indicates that most parents of children with special needs had a moderate stress level.

Table 2: Frequency distribution based on levels of Perceived stress among participants (N=100)

Levels	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
<i>High Stress</i>	8	8.0	18.53	6.07
<i>Low Stress</i>	21	21.0		
<i>Moderate Stress</i>	71	71.0		

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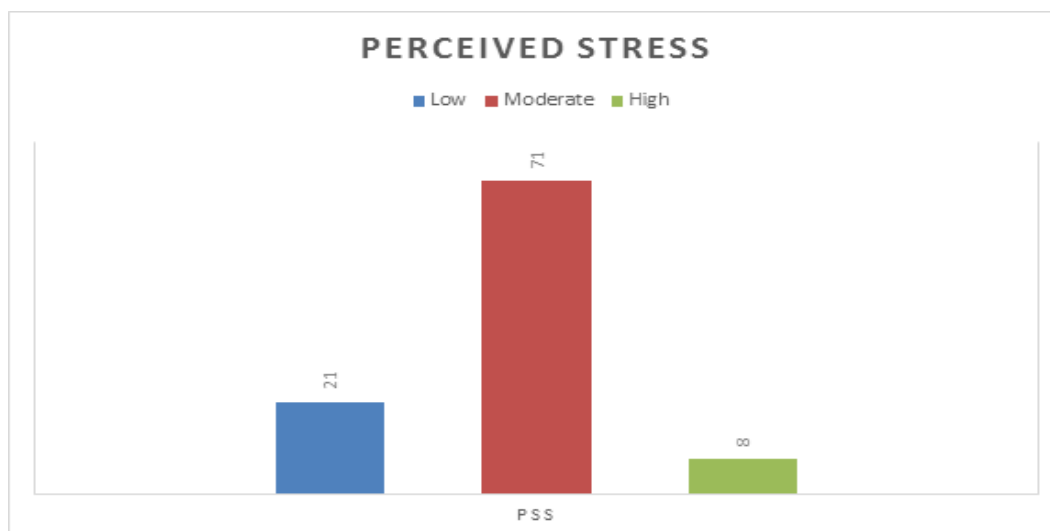
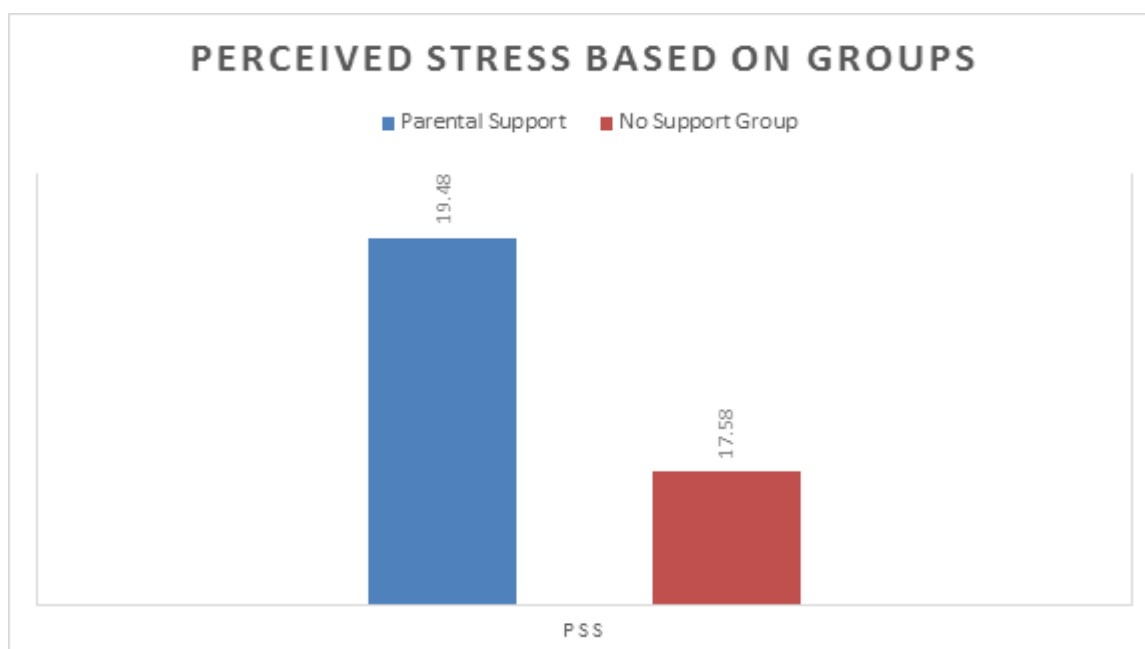


Table 3 presents perceived stress's mean, standard deviation, t value, and p-value. Parents who were part of the parental support groups had mean perceived stress of 19.48 (SD=6.84), whereas the parents who were not a part of any parental support group had a mean score of 17.58 (SD=5.09) on the perceived stress scale. The result indicates that parents of parental support groups had higher perceived stress. t-test shows that there was no significant difference ($t=1.575$, $p=0.119$) in perceived stress in reference to membership of parental support groups.

Table 3: Mean, Standard Deviation, and t value for Perceived stress among parents of parental support groups and no support group

	Parental Support Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	p
Perceived Stress	Yes	50	19.48	6.840	98	1.575	0.119
	No	50	17.58	5.099			



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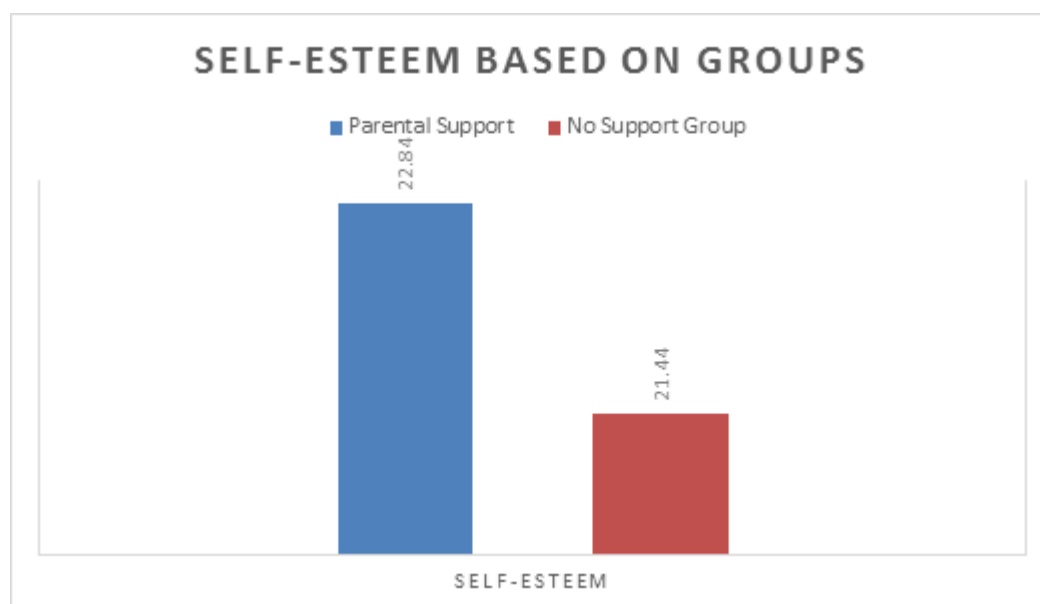
Self-esteem

Participants scored a mean score of 22.14 (SD=3.34) on the self-esteem scale.

Table 4 presents self-esteem's mean, standard deviation, t value, and p-value. Parents who were part of the parental support groups had mean self-esteem of 22.84 (SD=3.50), whereas the parents who were not a part of any parental support group had a mean score of 21.44 (SD=3.05) on the self-esteem scale. The result indicates that parents of parental support groups had better self-esteem. t-test shows a significant difference ($t=2.127$, $p=0.03$) in self-esteem in relation to membership of parental support groups.

Table 4: Mean, Standard Deviation, and t value for Self-esteem among parents of parental support groups and no support group

	Parental Support Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	p
Self-esteem	Yes	50	22.84	3.507	98	2.127	0.036
	No	50	21.44	3.058			



DISCUSSION

Perceived Stress

The results revealed that the participants had a mean score of 18.53 (SD=6.07) on the perceived stress scale. Most parents of children with special needs had a moderate level of stress which shows that parents of children with special needs know to deal with daily life challenges and take care of their children with special needs. Parents who were part of the parental support groups had mean perceived stress of 19.48 (SD=6.84), whereas the parents who were not a part of any parental support group had a mean score of 17.58 (SD=5.09) on the perceived stress scale. This indicates that parents of parental support groups had higher perceived stress, and having a support group does not help manage stress. t-test showed no significant difference in perceived stress in relation to membership of parental support groups ($t=1.575$, $p=0.119$). This means joining a parental support group has no significance in the stress management of parents of special children.

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Self-esteem

The results showed that the participants scored 22.14 (SD=3.34) on the self-esteem scale. Parents who were part of the parental support groups had mean self-esteem of 22.84 (SD=3.50), whereas the parents who were not a part of any parental support group had a mean score of 21.44 (SD=3.05) on the self-esteem scale. This indicates that having parental support groups increases the self-esteem of the parents/ caretakers of children with special needs. *t*-test shows that there was a significant difference in self-esteem in relation to membership of parental support groups ($t=2.127$, $p=0.03$). Also, there was a statistically significant association ($r=0.611$) between self-esteem and perceived stress at 0.01 levels.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that parents who were a part of parental support groups had better self-esteem than those who were not part of any parental support group. *t*-test shows that there was a significant difference in self-esteem in relation to membership of parental support groups ($t=2.127$, $p=0.03$). However, the perceived stress was higher among the parents of parental support groups. *t*-test showed no significant difference in perceived stress in relation to membership of parental support groups ($t=1.575$, $p=0.119$), which implies that joining a parental support group has no significance in the stress management of parents of special children. Also, there was a statistically significant association ($r=0.611$) between self-esteem and perceived stress at 0.01 levels.

Implications

This study emphasizes the critical necessity for medical, psychological, and educational professionals to give family-based interventions, particularly to assist parents raising a child with special needs. The study's findings have four main messages for professionals: (a) the significance of providing parents with support and resources for their child's disability, (b) the importance of ongoing communication between professionals and parents about the disability, (c) the significance of reminding parents to take care of themselves and their own mental health to support their child's requirements effectively, and (d) the need of trained caregivers, daycare and residential services and volunteers in housing societies who can look after children with special needs to give a break to parents for recreational activities and in case of stress.

Limitations

- The sample size for the study covered only 100 parents/caregivers of children with special needs.
- The majority of the participants were females.
- Cross-sectional institution-based study with a small-time frame for data collection
- Only the accompanying parents were studied. Including the other parents would have enriched the findings of the study
- All forms were filled out online in the absence of observation by the researcher.

Suggestions

Similar studies should be conducted by taking a larger sample, including both parents of children with special needs from other states of India, by using different psychological tools. Effects of various factors like family type, family income, age & gender of parents and children, etc. can be explored on the mental health of the parents of children with special needs.

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Acknowledgement

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

How to cite this article: Pallavi, A. & Subodh, K. (2022). Effects of Parental Support Group on Perceived Stress and Self-Esteem among Parents of Children with Special Needs. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 10(4), 348-355. DIP:18.01.031.20221004, DOI:10.25215/1004.031