

Coping Strategies of Parents having Children with Special Needs (CWSN)

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ABSTRACT: Parents having a child with special needs often experience a stressful life than those having a normally developing child. They go through a variety of stressors resulting from their child's disability. They experience a higher level of stress in bringing up their child as they require more parental support and attention as compared to normally developing children. It is observed that parents having children with special needs are affected in many ways which may persist throughout their life. Understanding various ways of coping is important, as it will help parents to choose effective coping skills to yield a significant impact in their child-rearing process. So, an attempt was made by the researcher to identify the various coping strategies adopted by these parents in raising their children with special needs. It was found that the majority of the parents tend to use one or more means of active coping strategies to cope with their child's disability. Necessary adjustments with skillful use of coping strategies can contribute to a healthier life. Through these findings, positive intervention and support programs can be designed for parents of children with special needs to strengthen their parenting skills, which is critical for a good parent-child relationship. Positive health and well-being can be achieved through skillful ways of dealing with stress.

Keywords: Children with special needs, disability, parenting, stress, coping-strategies, health, support, well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Parenting and raising children with special needs is stressful than normal parenting. Parenting refers to the process of raising a child by providing a safe, secure and nurturing environment. The birth of a child with special needs brings changes in the life of the parents for which they might not be prepared and will have bigger challenges to overcome in the future. The child may require special care, medication, support and services throughout their life. The type and severity of disability of the child are often associated with higher stress in parenting (Gupta, 2007). Sharief (2014) found that parents find it quite stressful to accept the disability of their child and if they had a severe impairment, greater dependency and discomfort are felt among parents. Also, Benson (2012) explained that long-term care of a child with a chronic disability frequently affects various areas in a parent's life such as marriage, career, relationships, which can lead to stress and may affect the overall functioning of the family. Children with special needs refer to those children who have impairment or disability and challenges which are more

severe than the normally developing children and could last a lifetime. These parents suffer from higher levels of stress and lower levels of well-being than parents with normal children. A result (Table 1) revealed in the present study also showed that the majority of the parents had an average level of stress in raising their special child and a majority of the mothers were the primary caregiver of the child. Jones and Passey (2004) also state that mothers being the primary caregiver of the child experiences more stress than fathers. Murphy (1990) explained disability as a 'disease of social relation'. Parents face a lot of questions from others and become socially isolated in a group. Literature on disability in India has pointed to the concept of *Karma*, which emphasized disability as a curse or punishment for a misdeed in past lives. Society's attitudes and beliefs towards disability also intensify the level of stress in parents. Wilson's (2019) study shows that Hindu religious belief affects response towards any disability negatively. Besides that, several studies have shown to demonstrate a significant rate of disability among individuals living in poverty.

The United Nations report on Disability and Development (2018) first provided evidence of an association between disability and poverty. The pressure that parents have in fulfilling their demands, financial strain, society's attitude and beliefs, often lead to a higher level of stress which may further lead to severe health problems, personality disorders and even death. Thus, parenting children with special needs may affect the well-being of parents as stated by Feizi *et al.*, (2014). A tragic incident was reported in the Kokrajhar district of Assam on 27th April 2019, where a mother killed her two children, a nine-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son, as both of them were divyang. Such an incident shows how parents' well-being can be affected due to higher levels of stress (The Northeast Today, Dated: 28.04.2019). So, coping with such stressful situations that are beyond one's control is the greatest challenge in life (Somasekhar, 2017). According to Khan and Humstoe (2016), coping refers to behavioral strategies used to reduce the effect of stress. Coping strategies can be categorized as active coping, passive coping and avoidance coping (Sahler and Carr, 2009). Active coping includes gathering information, securing social support, prioritizing tasks, turning to religion, requesting and accepting help from family and friends. Passive coping refers to a feeling of helplessness to deal with the stressor and relying on others to resolve the stressful event or situation (Zeidnar and Endler, 1996). Picci *et al.*, (2015) states that parents of children with special needs tend to use various strategies to cope with stress such as looking for support, avoidance strategies, self-blame, drug abuse, reconstruction of stressful situations in positive manner, religious attitudes or denial. According to Kamaruddin and Mamat (2015), parents are more likely to turn towards religion engaging in prayer for reassurance and increased religious activities to reduce stress. Thakuri (2014) found that as the level of stress on parents' increases, the use of coping strategies also increases in the process of caring for a disabled child. Thus, parents can cope with stress in adaptive ways for good health and well-being. Hastings *et al.*, (2005) found positive coping strategies are associated with lower levels of depression in parents of children with autism. Interventions on developing coping skills can be effective for parents to mitigate stress to some extent. Thus, parents who tend to use problem-solving skills and strategies experience less parental stress (Bushman and Peacock, 2010) that can help in achieving a balance in family functioning and also

improving their quality of life. Parents must learn to tackle their child's problems by enhancing their coping skills to reduce their parenting stress. Although some research has been carried out in India and abroad on parenting stress and the use of coping strategies, very limited studies have been conducted in Assam. So, to address the significant research gap and to develop future strategies, the present study was undertaken by the researcher to identify coping skills adopted by parents in raising their children with special needs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in a special school, in Jorhat district of Assam. With due permission of the school authority, a sample of 80 parents was selected purposively for the study. An interview schedule was prepared by the researcher to gather information regarding the use of coping strategies. The schedule consisted of certain statements that parents tend to use as a means of coping to reduce their level of stress. The data was collected by interviewing each respondent using the prepared schedule. Focus group discussion was also organized with some parents to take their opinion regarding the use of coping strategies. After the collection of the data, raw data was categorized, coded, and tabulated for statistical computation. Descriptive statistical methods such as frequency and percentage were used to analyze the data using SPSS software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the objectives of the present study showed that the majority of the parents had an average level of stress in raising their children with special needs. The table (Table 1) depicted below showed that 60 % of the parents had an average level of stress in raising their children with special needs and 21.3 % had a low level of stress. It was found that 18.8 % of the parents were highly stressed, in raising their children.

The high level of stress may be due to various factors such as the severity of the child's disability, dependency of the child on the parents, behavioral problems, difficulty in education, thoughts about the future and also due to feelings of isolation and neglect. These findings can be supported by the study conducted by Bawalsah, (2016) which showed that parents of children with disabilities often experience a high level of stress and parents having children with physical disabilities tend to have the highest levels of stress.

Table 1: Stress level of parents.

Level of stress	Number of parents (N=80)	
	Frequency	Percentage
High	15	18.8
Average	48	60.0
Low	17	21.3

Adapting and adjusting to a life situation with a disability that causes stress is not easy, but there are certain ways to cope with those limitations. So, to overcome their level of stress parents tend to use various coping strategies. Table 2 depicts the coping strategies used by parents having children with special needs to reduce their level of stress. The results revealed that 100% of the parents preferred to seek assistance from institutions working with special children and also required professional help and support. They felt that taking assistance from these organizations and professionals helped them to reduce their stress over time in managing their children with different disabilities. This can be supported by the result of Pritzlaff (2001) who conducted a study to examine the coping strategies of the parents having children with disabilities and found that, the two most frequently utilized coping strategies were acquiring social support and reframing. As a means of coping strategy, 86.3% of parents worshipped God, offered prayers, performed religious rituals and had faith in God that their problem will be resolved over the coming years. They believed that the Almighty would give them the strength to deal with their children. According to Dogan, (2016), religion is morally supportive for families with children with developmental disabilities. People turn to religion under difficult conditions and can continue in life because of their religious beliefs. More than half of the parents (72.5%) have learnt to live with their child's disability. They have learned to adjust themselves according to the needs of their child. Even though it is a challenge, they have tried to cope with the demands according to the various situations. This can be supported by the study of Heiman (2016) on parents of children with disabilities, their resilience, coping and future expectations which reported that the majority of the parents had an optimistic outlook, a realistic view, and acceptance of their child's disability. Some parents tried

to cope with stress by taking advice from family members and friends. About 45% of the parents coped with stress by taking advice from their family members and 38.8% of them preferred to take advice from friends apart from their family. They opined that talking with other parents in school, spending the day with them, talking about each other's need, and taking advice from them helps them to reduce their stress. Few parents (30%) reported that they tend to share their responsibility at home with other members of the family in terms of looking after the child, carrying out the household activities, bringing the child to school, etc. Using assistive devices and appliances such as a special chair, walking stick, hearing aids, etc. as a means of coping with the child's disability was reported by 25% of parents. The use of assistive devices helps the child to perform himself to some extent which tends to reduce stress in parents. Some also tried to cope with stress through entertainment such as reading books and magazines, listening to music, involving in social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp, etc. Only a few tried to cope with stress by involving in exercise and yoga as a form of relaxation techniques. A few parents opined that keeping themselves busy in leisure activities also helped them to cope with stress. In the present study, it was found that majority of the parents tried to cope with stress by using active coping strategies rather than passive or avoidance coping strategies. Since raising children with special needs is a lifelong process, parents have tried to cope themselves according to the needs of their child by using different coping strategies. There is also a significant correlation between psychological well-being and coping strategies which is evident from the study of Hayat *et al.* (2015) that studied the relationship between psychological well-being and coping strategies and found that problem-focused coping was positively correlated to psychological well-being.

Table 2: Coping strategies used by parents.

Coping strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Take advice from family members	36	45.0
Take advice from friends	31	38.8
Share responsibilities with other members of the family	24	30.0
Take assistance from institutions working with special children	80	100
Take professional help and support	80	100
Use of assistive devices and appliances	20	25
Read books and magazines	8	10
Enjoy music	3	3.8
Involve in social media	9	11.3
Suppress the emotions	22	27.5
Involve in exercise and other relaxation techniques	6	7.5
Accept the reality and learn to live with it	58	72.5
Concern with the positive aspect of life	15	18.8
Have faith in God	69	86.3

CONCLUSION

In the present study, it was examined that parents tried to cope with stress by using one or more coping strategies. Parents preferred to get assistance from institutions and professionals working with special children as and when required. Many parents learned to live and make adjustments. They had faith in God that their child will recover over the years. Also, parents can enhance their coping strategy, through relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, etc that are effective in stress management.

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Conflict of Interest. None.

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