Parental Stress, Coping Strategies and Social Support in Families of Children With a Disability


**SUMMARY:** Parents of children with developmental disabilities face many stressors and may cope in a variety of ways. This study examined the relationships between parent stress and coping strategies among parents of children with high- and low-functioning autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Down syndrome, and typically-developing children. Results suggest that some coping strategies may work best for particular parent groups, and parents of children with ASD have greater stress levels than other parent groups.

**KEY FINDINGS:**
- Parents of children with ASD reported having more overall stress compared to parents of children with Down syndrome or typically-developing children.
- The most effective coping strategies for stress were turning to religion for parents of children with high-functioning ASD and problem-solving for parents of children with Down syndrome.
- Avoidance coping was related to greater stress in parents with children with Down syndrome, high-functioning ASD, and typically-developing children.
- Social support was an important protective factor against stress for all parents, but particularly support from family members and especially for parents of children with Down syndrome.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:**
Military professionals could:
- Facilitate support groups for military families with a child with a developmental disability
- Attend trainings about coping strategies in the military and among families of children with developmental disabilities to better help those families utilize healthy coping skills

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:**
Programs could:
- Educate military families with children with developmental disabilities about effective and ineffective coping skills for stress
- Disseminate information to military families with children with developmental disabilities about the types of social support (e.g., family, friends) that most effectively reduce parent stress

**IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:**
Policies could:
- Recommend education for all providers working with military families about developmental disabilities and the associated family stress
- Promote the development of programs supporting military parents of children with developmental disabilities, particularly parents with added responsibilities during deployment

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.

www.reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu
METHODS
- Parents of children with ASD and Downs syndrome were recruited from rehabilitation centers.
- Parents of typically-developing children were recruited and matched on socioeconomic status.
- Only biological, two-parent families were included, and the overall response rate was 71%.
- Parents completed questionnaires about stress and coping strategies, including receiving social support, and the relationships between those variables were analyzed.

PARTICIPANTS
- Participants included 60 parents of children with developmental disabilities who had participated in a rehabilitation program and 40 parents of typically-developing children.
- Mothers had an average age of 40.1 years (SD = 4.8), and fathers had an average age of 43.8 years (SD = 5.5); children were 56% male with an average age of 7.82 years (SD = 3.3).
- Children included those with a diagnosis of high-functioning ASD (20%), low-functioning ASD (16%), and Down syndrome (24%), as well as typically-developing children (40%).
- No data on race or ethnicity were provided.

LIMITATIONS
- The sample was not thoroughly described, making conclusions about generalizability difficult.
- Parents who volunteered for the study may differ from parents who did not, especially since all participating parents were help-seeking and taking their children to a rehabilitation program.
- The study is cross-sectional, so implications about the direction of effects cannot be inferred.
- The definition of coping via turning to religion is unclear.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Explore the relationship between parent stress and coping among parents of children with developmental disabilities in different family structures rather than only two-parent families
- Investigate gender differences in coping among parents of children with developmental disabilities
- Conduct a longitudinal study of parent coping and stress among families with a child with developmental disabilities to examine how stress and coping may change over time

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design
- Appropriate Research Plan and Sample (3 stars)

Methods
- Appropriate Measurement and Analysis (3 stars)

Limitations
- Few (2 stars)

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works

www.reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu