

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

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

Cuzzocrea, F., Murdaca, A. M., Costa, S., Filippello, P., & Larcán, R. (2016). Parental stress, coping strategies and social support in families of children with a disability. *Child Care in Practice*, 22 (1), 19-Mar. doi:10.1080/13575279.2015.1064357

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

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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

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