**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

**PARENTAL STRESS AND AUTISM: DIFFERENCES IN PERCEIVED STRESS AND COPING BEHAVIOR**

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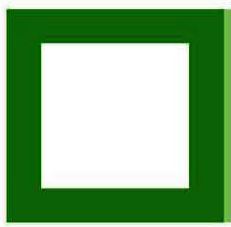
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# ABSTRACT OBJECTIVE



To study perceived stress and coping behaviors of parents of children with Autism.

# STUDY DESIGN

Cross sectional study

# PLACE AND DURATION OF THE STUDY

The data was collected from eight different special education schools situated in Rawalpindi and Islamabad between June 2015 to February 2016.

# SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Parents, consisting of (n=103) mothers and (n=83) fathers of children with autism were included in the study. Parental stress was measured using Urdu version of questionnaire on resources and stress and coping behaviors were measured using Urdu version of family crisis oriented personal evaluation scales. Children with autism were diagnosed using childhood autism rating scale-2.

# RESULTS

Mothers perceived more stress related to family problem and they were more pessimistic whereas fathers perceived more stress related to lack of available services for their children with autism. Fathers of children withautism perceived more stressas compared with mothers when the child was severely autistic. Employing more coping behaviors e.g. acquiring social support both formal and informal, reframing and more use of passive appraisal helped reduce stress in both mothers and fathers of children with autism. It was also found that spiritual coping was more effective for mothers thanfathers of children with autism.

# CONCLUSION

Mothers perceived more stress as compare with fathers on various dimensions of stress. However, when the child had severe autism fathers perceived more stress as compared with mothers of children with Autism. More use of coping behaviors leaded to lessstress in bothparents.

# KEYWORDS

Autism,Mother/father'sstress,Coping behaviors.

# INTRODUCTION

Individuals with autism show marked impaired in social interaction, restricted, and repetitive behaviour and communication. It can be detected by the age of 3 years'. Developing world has recently been open to the elements related to awareness, research and documentation on Autism that has existed in the developed world for decades. In Pakistan exact number of children having Autistic disorder is not available. Few small scale studies do report the prevalence of autistic children entering special education setup, however exact number isstillnot know'·'

In Pakistan Autism isa newly conceived phenomenon and familiesare not clear about what autism really means.' It'sunique characteristics and unclear etiology creates stress for the families. Things become even more difficult when there is lack of proper educational and professional services for children with autistic disorder. Professionals in the field have various misconceptions regarding salient features of autism, which is one of the barrier in improving health and well-being of children with autistic disorder.'These factor arethe sourcesof stress for parents of children with Autism. There are several negative consequences that are emerging from elevated stress in parents, beside, their own poor physical health' and psychological health'.It is also associated with the child's poor treatment outcomes, more behavior problemandthe childdevelopment.'

Coping is a universal phenomenon and exhibit in cognitive and behavioral forms'. Research evidence depicts that to overcome the stress parents use coping strategies as mechanism to adapt to stressors associated with raising a childwith autistic disorder".Recent intervention plans are geared towards strengthening and maintaining family resources to protect the parents from demands of stressful encounters and reduce the sourcesof stress"·". Therefore it isvery essential to investigate stressorsin the life of parentsand how they cope with stressors. In a Pakistani cultural environment where research related to autistic disorder has received little attention, this research will amenable for future researchers in areas of intervention and prevention efforts for families. The study aims to investigate a) differences between perceived stress in mothers and fathers of children with autism b) differences in mothers' and fathers' stress with reference to autism symptom severity (Minimal to no symptoms, Mild to moderate symptoms and Severe Symptoms).c) relationship between stress and coping behaviors of parents with autistic children.

# SUBJECTS AND METHODS



**Participants**

Parents of children with Autism were selected via using non probability purposive sampling technique. Parents of children between age ranged 6 to 12 years fulfilling the diagnosis criteria of autistic disorder on childhood autism rating scale 2 were included. Parents of children with any co- morbid disorders like epilepsy, genetic disorders, intellectual disability or global delays were not included inthe present study.

# Instruments

Child hood autism rating scale -2 (CARS-2) was used to diagnose children with autism." It is a diagnostic assessment tool that rates children on a scale from one to four on various dimensions, ranging from normal to severe and yields a composite score ranging from non-autistic to mildly autistic, moderately autistic, or severely autistic. Paternal stress was measured by Urdu version of Questionnaire on resources and Stress (QRS)", it consist of 51 items that measure stress in five different dimensions that are "parent and family problems", "pessimism","financial stress","stressdue to lack of Services" and "Stress due to lack of awareness". The items on QRS were rated on five point likert scale and high score is indicative of high stress. Urdu version of "The Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scales" (FCOPES) wasused to assesscoping behaviors."lt consist of five subscales Acquiring Social Support, Reframing, Seeking Spiritual Support, Mobilizing Family Support and Passive Appraisal.It was rated on five point likert scale.High score on FCOPES is indicative of more use of coping behaviors to overcome stress.

# Procedure

Initially telephonic consent was taken from parents. Through initial screening (n=110) children were identified as the probable cases of autistic disorder. Each child was observed by two independent observers and later the diagnosis was confirmed by a clinical psychologist. Atthisstage,writtenconsent was taken from parentsof children with Autism, demographic sheet was filled in order to get back ground information. After screening the child on CARS-2, information was gathered regarding their stressors and coping behaviors. The data was analyzed using SPSS(statistical package for social sciences) VS20.

# RESULTS

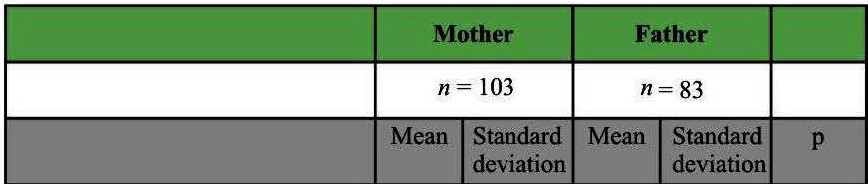
The sample characteristicsdepicted that 50% of the fathersand 70 % mothersfall in age range from 32 to 42 years. A good number of the mothers in the present sample were house wives (67%). 61.8 % parentsliving in nuclear family setups, whereas 38.2 % were residing in joint family setup.60.4% of the sample wasearning between 5,000 to 30,000 Pakistani rupeespermonth.

Initially the scales were subjected to reliability testing and it was

found the inter-rater reliability of two independent observers on CARS-2 was excellent, Kappa= 0.89 at 95% Cl (0.79, 1.00).The alpha reliability coefficient for QRS-F was .91 and FCOPES was .87, hence providing evidence that the instrumentsarereliable toolsto be used withthe present sample.

**Table** I

Differences between mothers and fathers on various dimensions of stress scale.

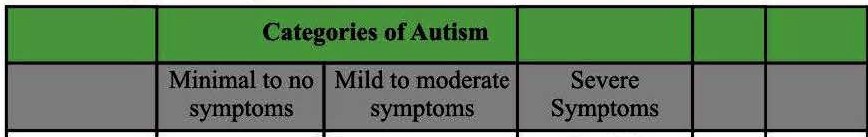


|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | | | |  |
| Parent and family problems | 69.23 | 17.45 | 59.56 | 16.95 | .00 |
| Pessimism | 28.89 | 8.64 | 26.37 | 8.24 | .04 |
| Financial stress | 11.44 | 4.74 | 11.14 | 4.36 | .65 |
| Stress due to lack of services | 22.59 | 6.16 | 25.68 | 6.30 | .00 |
| Stress due to lack of awareness | 12.93 | 3.07 | 12.87 | 3.17 | .90 |
| Total score Stress | 145.10 | 31.04 | 135.64 | 28.38 | .03 |

Independent sample t test was used to analyze the data.Mothers(M

= 145.10, SD = 31.04) of children with autistic disorder were more stressed as compared with fathers (M= 135.64, SD= 28.38). Further analysis revealed that mothers perceived more stress related to "Parent and family problems" (M = 69.23, SD = 17.45) and "Pessimism" (M = 28.89, SD = 8.64) as compare with fathers (M = 59.56, SD = 16.95), (M = 26.37, SD = 8.24). Fathers of children with autistic disorder perceived more stress (M = 25.68, SD = 6.30) with reference to unavailability of services for their autistic children as compare with mothers (M=22.59,SD=6.16).

**Table 2**

Differences in level of stress experienced by mothers and father in relationship to severity of symptoms in children with autism

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | (n=l0) | | *(n=52)* | | (n=48) | |  |  |
|  | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | *F* | *Turkey*  *post hoc* |
| Mother stress | l09.70 | 18.33 | 138.77 | 26.68 | 151.21 | 25.0 | 16.48 | 3>2>1 |
| Father Stress | l02.37 | 20.1 | 128.10 | 23.7 | 159.96 | 28.85 | 17.13 | 3>2>1 |

*df=80,,* • *••p..;;0.01*

Results showed that mother's stress was high when the child had severe symptomsof autism (M = 159.96,SD= 28.85) as compare with mild to moderate symptoms (M = 138.77, SD= 26.68) and minimal to no symptoms (M = 109.70, SD= 18.33) Tukey post-hoc analysis revealed that stress in mothers of children with autism was more when their children suffer from severe autism symptom as compare with mild and moderate.Father'sstress washigh when thechild had severe symptomsof autism (M = 151.21, SD= 25.0) as compare with mild to moderate symptoms(M = 128.10, SD= 23.7) and minimal to no symptoms (M = 102.37, SD= 20.1) and Tukey post-hoc analysis revealed that stress in fathersof children with autism wasmore when their children suffer from severe autism symptom as compare with mild and moderate. It was concluded that both mother and father perceived stress related to their child symptom severity group but fathers of children with severe autism perceived more stress as compare with mothers,when thechild isseverelyautistic.

**Table 3**

Relationship between stress and coping behaviors in parents of children with Autism

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Acquiring Social Support** | -.24\* | **-.28\*\*** |
| **Reframing** | -.28\* | **-.34\*\*** |
| Seeking Spiritual Support | -.18 | **-.32\*\*** |
| Mobilizing Family to Acquire and Accept Help | -.24\* | **-.32\*\*** |
| **Passive Appraisal** | -.23\* | **-.39\*\*** |
| **Coping behaviors** | **-.31**\*\* | **-.42\*\*** |

*\*\*p<.01,* \* *p<.05*

## DISCUSSION

In the present study stress was high in mothers of children with autism as compare with their fathers."·"·" Moreover, mothers had more stress related to their family problems and they are more pessimistic about their children future as compare with fathers, this may be because mothers are more involved in child rearing practices and interact more within family" Fathers of children with autism perceived more stress related to lack of services for children as compared with the mothers. In Pakistan unavailability of proper

with autistic disorder isrequired so that better intervention plans can be formulated that can help in better psychological health of child andbothparents.

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services related to screening, diagnosis, early intervention,



educational facilitation etc is one of the major source of stress especially for fathers of children with autism.

In the present study it was found that impact of symptom severity of autism was more on father stress as compare with mother stress; previous research supported this." It was identified in the past literature that fathers do feel difficulty in communicating with children with autism and certain behaviors of child do cause stress in fathers." In previous research fathers of children with autism are often taken as invisible parents and researches are usually designed to capture concept of maternal caregiving."

Except for "Seeking Spiritual Support" all others dimensions of coping behaviors (acquiring social support; reframing; mobilizing family to acquire and accept help and passive appraisal) showed significant negative relationship with stress in fathers of children with autism. Moreover, there exists a significant negative relationship between different dimensions of coping behaviors and mother stress. More use of coping behaviors leads to less stress in mothers" as well as fathers of children with Autism". Coping is an important interventional tool that can help reduce stress related to parenting achild withautism."

## CONCLUSION

Overall stress was high in mothers as compare with fathers of children with autism. Mothers perceived more stress in areas related to family problems and they are more pessimistic as compare with fathers, whereas fathers perceived more stress because of unavailability of services for their children with autism. Fathers of children with autism perceive more stress as compare with mothers when the child is severely autistic. Employing more family coping behaviors help to reduce stress in both mothers and fathers of children with autism. More research related to parents of children

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