

Parental Stress among Parents of Children with Learning Disability

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Abstract

Parenting a child with learning disability is challenging. Under the pressure of societal aspirations, where education is associated with the academic and also the social, personal, occupational, and financial success of an individual, parents of children with learning disability feel disappointed. This is not just because of their children being at a disadvantageous position in terms of academics but also due to the social stigma attached to the label of being Learning Disabled. The assessment and deliverance of affected children's academic, emotional, and social needs are often confusing and traumatic for parents. Many parents experience stress as they adjust to the demands of raising a learning-disabled child. This review aims to develop the current state of understanding regarding parental stress among parents of children with learning disability. Mendeley and Google Scholar databases were used. Those articles that have the terms learning disability/dyslexia/dysgraphia/dyscalculia in the title and the term parental stress in the title or among study variables published between 2014 and 2021 were included. Most studies inferred that parent of children with learning disability undergo parental stress. Parents of children with learning disability experience more stress compared to parents of typically developing children. Compared to the days before the Covid-19, the parents experienced more stress during quarantine and other restrictive environments. There is a need for all parents of children with learning disabilities to be routinely screened for parental stress and be provided with interventions that focus on managing their parental stress.

Keywords: children, dyslexia, learning disability, parenting, parental stress

Introduction

Parental stress is a type of stress that occurs when parents' impression of parental responsibilities is beyond their resources. Parental stress can negatively affect parents' mood and behaviour towards their children. Parents might experience stress for various reasons such as financial difficulties, a lack of social support, marital problems, or challenges for children. Stressors have a negative impact on the general well-being and health of the parents and require their attention and emotional energy. Parental stress can reduce parents' involvement, attention, patience, and tolerance of their children and increase the use of punitive measures. When this is a typical circumstance, it becomes even more complicated if the child has a disability. There are numerous disabilities; one of them is Specific Learning Disability, a disability that is more of a hidden nature. Specific Learning Disabilities are neurodevelopmental disorders that are usually identified and diagnosed during primary classes in school. If not identified, SLDs can have far-reaching and adverse consequences for persons affected by it in adulthood and may negatively affect their lives' academic, social, personal, occupational, and financial aspects. Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, etc., are some of the commonly known disorders. According to American Psychiatric Association (2013), as recorded in DSM -V, symptoms of Specific Learning Disabilities may include difficulties in reading, writing, understanding mathematical concepts, numbers, facts, calculation, reasoning, etc. This may result in academic performance below the expected level and may cause problems in school work and extracurricular activities. It is to be noted here that persons affected by Learning Disabilities usually have average or above-average levels of intelligence. They may or may not have certain comorbidities like Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, etc. There is a growing prevalence and concern about learning

disabilities and parenting a child with a learning disability is found exhausting. In a world where education is paramount, these parents are dismayed when their child falls behind in the educational process. The process of discovering such a child's needs is often confusing and traumatic for parents. Many parents experience stress as they adjust to the demands of raising a learning-disabled child. This review aims to develop the current state of understanding regarding parental stress among parents of children with a learning disability.

Methodology

Mendeley and Google Scholar databases were used. Those articles that have the terms learning disability/dyslexia/dysgraphia/dyscalculia in the title and the term parental stress in the title or among study variables published between 2014 and 2021 were included.

Review of Literature

A recent study by Mohammadipour, Dasht, and Hooman (2021) examines the role of the mental health of mothers of children with learning disabilities in the relationship between parental stress, mother-child interaction, and children's behavioural disorders. 210 students were selected as a study sample using the convenience sampling method. The proposed model was evaluated using path analysis in AMOS v. 24. Results indicated a direct and significant relationship between parental stress and children's behavioural disorders ($\beta=0.321$, $P=0.0001$); mother-child interaction and mothers' mental health ($\beta=0.255$, $P=0.001$). In addition, there was a negative relationship between mother-child interaction and children's behavioural disorders ($\beta=-0.148$, $P=0.019$); parental stress and mothers' mental health ($\beta=-0.581$, $P=0.0001$). Furthermore, the collected results presented a reverse and significant relationship between mothers' mental health and children's behavioural disorders ($\beta=-0.360$, $P=0.0001$). The indirect path analysis data showed that the mothers' mental

health played a mediating role in the relationship between parental stress, mother-child interaction, and behavioural disorders in the children ($P = 0.001$).

In their study, Pouillet and Wendland (2021) discussed the parenting of dyslexic children, especially concerning parental stress and the parent-child relationship. The sample consisted of 105 mothers of French dyslexic children. The parents did not report a general level of stress. However, the type of comorbidities associated with the child's dyslexia (ADHD, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Anxiety, High Potential) significantly impacted the parents' stress levels. Parents reported feelings of loneliness associated with a lack of support from both teachers and health professionals involved in caring for their children. They also reported everyday challenges related to their children's condition, such as difficulties in their own professional careers. Negative consequences of other co-morbid conditions such as ADHD or anxiety have also been reported. Most mothers, however, reported good parental skills and emphasised that their dyslexic child had good skills in other areas as well. In addition, the interviewed mothers mentioned the coping strategies they had to use to raise a child with special needs. Finally, some mothers reported that the parent-child relationship appears to be influenced by the child's difficulties with them being more protective and supportive about the dyslexic child.

A study was conducted by Chan and Mo (2021) among Chinese parents of children with dyslexia to find out the socio-cultural interpretation of parental stress. Twenty parents of children with formally diagnosed dyslexia were interviewed, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed four categories of themes related to parental stress which were- characteristics of children and study problems for children, daily responsibilities and maternal role inequality, educator's power and control, and social comparisons and promoting a blaming culture.

In addition, coping methods used by parents were identified via internal coping resources, e.g., being more sensitive to one's own emotions; placing more value on the "other strengths" of children; using cultural and religious beliefs to current situations; utilising external coping resources; enhancing support from spouses; more active communication with teachers.

Soriano-Ferrer et al. (2021) examined the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic in a sample of 32 Spanish children with dyslexia and their parents. Children and adolescents with dyslexia and their mother provided data before and during the national quarantine in Spain. The study revealed that children with dyslexia experienced higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms during quarantine. Parents observed more emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity-inattention, less reading activity, and less reading motivation in children. In comparison to pre-quarantine conditions, parents reported much higher stress during quarantine. Certain psychological and demographic variables predicted children's state of anxiety and parental stress. As evident through this study, nearly all parents reported of child's learning being affected, trouble in creating study routines, lack of guidance from teachers on how to support their child's learning, and worry about the child's school success, motivation, and interest in reading, and peer relations. They were also worried about the professional skills of the teacher.

Stress and coping styles of parents with children having learning disabilities have been reported by Anuar et al. (2021). 274 parents of children with learning disabilities were selected as participants. The study used a quantitative cross-sectional design carried out at the community-based rehabilitation centres (CBR) in Malaysia. Based on the findings, there were high levels of stress experienced by parents of children with learning disabilities. However, there were no significant stress level differences between the father and mother in the study. Parents of

children with higher educational backgrounds and socio-economic status tend to feel more stressed than those with lower educational backgrounds and socio-economic status. The emotion-based coping strategies were reported to be the most frequently used by the parents. The study has also found significant differences in the parental stress level based on race, educational level, and occupation.

In a randomised pilot study by Park et al. (2020), a virtual program for parents of children with learning and attention disorders was carried out. A mixed-methods study was conducted to adapt and evaluate the virtual implementation of a mind and body resilience program, the Stress Management and Resilience Training Relaxation Resilience Program (SMART-3RP), to meet the needs of parents of children to meet with LAD. This was a weekly group intervention with eight sessions. The parents were randomly assigned to an immediate intervention group (IG) or waiting-list control group (WC). Surveys were carried out thrice. One, at baseline. Two, at the end of the intervention for the IG or three months post-baseline for the WC. And third, three months after treatment for the IG or the end of the intervention for the WC. Qualitative results showed high levels of parental stress with primary stressors such as navigating the educational system, interactions with other parents, family concerns, and financial and professional victims. T1–T2 comparisons showed that IG versus WC participants had significant improvements in terms of distress and resilience as well as coping with stress, depression, anxiety, social support, and empathy. The improvements were seen to be sustained on follow-up three months post-intervention. SMART-3RP was found promising by this pilot wait-list randomised trial.

The relationship between coping skills and psychological distress in parents of children with learning disabilities was examined by Nordin and Husain (2020). Parents of children with learning disabilities were invited to participate in this study.

Malay version DASS 21 and Malay Brief COPE were used to assess parents' psychological distress and coping skills. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22 was used for the data analysis. Among 74 parents, 29.7% had depression, 44.6% had anxiety, and 24.3% were stressed. They all used problem-focused coping skills, 66.4% used emotion-focused coping skills, and 10.8% used less useful coping skills. Behavioral disengagement coping skills were associated with depression, anxiety and stress ($p < 0.001$, $p < 0,001$ and $p = 0.003$) whereas ethnicity was associated with anxiety and stress ($p = 0.026$ and $p = 0.001$). Stress was found to be associated with coping skills of self-distraction ($p = 0.024$).

180 people whose children received special training in a special school and rehabilitation centre in Istanbul took part in a study by Bakir and Demirli (2020). The study aimed to find the influence of self-compassion and family support perception on parental stress in parents of children with Learning Disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Intellectual Disability. On statistical analysis, the results found that the self-compassion and family support of parents who have children with learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and intellectual disabilities were found to have a significant impact on parental stress. Accordingly, as the level of self-compassion and family support increases, the level of parental stress of the parents decreases.

In a phenomenological study by Anand and Khan (2020), parents' burden & stress due to Child's Specific Learning Disability was studied. Semi-structured Interview Schedule was administered to 10 Parents (10 mothers + 10 fathers) of SLD children who are already diagnosed. Content Analysis was used to elicit the data from open-ended questions. Following observations were reported - (i) Working as a solo caretaker, fulfilling the demands & requirements of the child put parents with a feeling of exhaustion. (ii) Both mother and father accepted that their role is

challenging and important, and being a parent, they cannot back-step from their duties. (iii) Parents extra hours of care somehow affect the relationship with spouse and family as they left with no time. (iv) Life of parents of children with SLD becomes complicated as they have to handle their work and family simultaneously. Both work and family demand lots of labour, and they get exhausted with low self-esteem, depression, and low-level motivation in life. (v) Parents feel embarrassed and sad while the child's academic matters are discussed. (vi) Mothers have to bear the ill words from family and are not free from the victimisation of cultural taboo. (vii) It is difficult for parents to sustain the expenses of rehabilitation therapies in addition to routine daily expenses. (viii) The overwhelming duties and demands of parents make them frustrated, irritated, and depressed, affecting their well-being.

A sample of 27 parents of children with ADHD (P-ADHD), 38 parents of children diagnosed with dyslexia (P-DYS), and 65 parents of children with typical development (P-TD) participated in the study by Bonifacci et al. (2019). A battery of cognitive tests was performed, including verbal and non-verbal IQ, reading speed, verbal fluency, and Attention Network Task (ANT). In addition, questionnaires were used to assess reading history, adult ADHD symptoms, and parental stress. The P-DYS group got lower scores in the reading tasks, the verbal fluency task, and in the reading history. On the other hand, the P-ADHD group had greater transversal cognitive weaknesses as well as the highest scores in parental stress and ADHD symptoms, together with poor reading history. In addition, lower socio-economic level (SES), the number of family members, and greater ADHD symptoms all predicted parental stress in the entire group.

Moideen and Mathai (2018) examined the parental stress of mothers of children with learning disabilities. The sample included 112 mothers of children with learning disabilities and

112 mothers of typically developing children. Instruments were socio-demographic data and parental stress scale. The result of the t-test revealed a significant difference in the stress experienced by mothers of children with learning disabilities compared with typically developing children.

Coetzee, Adnams and Swartz (2018) attempted to understand parental stress in parents of children with learning and developmental disabilities and behaviours that challenge, through a psychodynamic approach using clinical examples. The study found that parents of children with learning and developmental disabilities and challenging behaviours often use primary defence mechanisms associated with their children's behaviour, albeit reciprocally rather than causally.

Through a set of regression models, the hidden costs of diagnosing learning disabilities - parental advocacy, stress, and efficacy - were examined by Behar (2017). There was a negative correlation between stress and self-efficacy. However, socio-economic status seemed to have no impact on the strength of this relationship. Findings say that regardless of socio-economic status, the more stressed Generation X parents, the less self-efficacious they felt. No significant moderation was found in the study.

Ali, El-Kahkky and Omar (2018) examined the neurological, cognitive and behavioural profiles of dyslexic children and their parental stress. Twenty boys and ten girls with dyslexia between the ages of 8 and 13 and their mothers were involved in the study and were picked up by the learning rehabilitation unit in the special needs children centre. All children underwent rapid neurological screening, cognitive processing, and behavioral problem assessment. All mothers were subjected to a parental stress assessment. Data showed that 83.3% of the children have motor coordination problems, 50% have cognitive processing dysfunction, particularly weakness in

planning and visual-spatial related skills, 80% of the children have at least one co-morbid behavioural disorder, the commonest being depression and anxiety, with girls having higher levels of depression than the boys. Moreover, there was statistically significant incompetency regarding social and sports-related activities. Regarding the mothers, 90% had an extremely high level of parental stress related to their children's behavioral problems and characteristics, and the mother characteristics.

Parental stress in parents of children with learning disabilities was examined by Auriemma et al. (2017). The participants completed a self-report measure consisting of 147 parents of children aged 5 to 12 diagnosed with learning disabilities. The effects of the predictor variables on parenting stress were examined through a hierarchical multiple regression model. Results found that the parenting stress levels were predicted by the parent's perceptions of the severity of their child's learning disability and their use of emotion-focused coping strategies. Participants' beliefs about their self-efficacy in the parenting role, as well as their satisfaction in the parenting role, were not significant predictors of parenting stress.

Maternal stress and coping strategies in developmental dyslexia were studied by Carotenuto et al. (2017). A total of 874 children (500 boys, 374 girls) affected by developmental dyslexia were part of the study. A sum of 1,421 typically developing were recruited from local schools of participating Italian Regions were the control group.

Mothers of children with DD showed a higher score in all parental stress indexes. Higher rates of emotion-oriented ($p < 0.001$) and avoidance-oriented ($p < 0.001$) coping styles were reported in mothers of children with DD than in mothers of typically developing children. Also, a lower task-oriented coping style was present in mothers of children with DD ($p < 0.001$).

The impact of a resilience fostering program on parenting stress, marital satisfaction and resiliency of children with learning disability was explored by Kaveh and Keramati (2017). The study was a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test-post-test and one control group. Thirty-four parents were selected using random sampling and assigned to two experimental and one control group. Abidin (1983), Houdson (1992), and Conner- Davidson (2003) Questionnaires were used to evaluate parenting stress, marital satisfaction, and resiliency, respectively. Covariance analysis revealed that training the resilience program could decline parenting stress and one of its subscales, i.e., parenting distress ($P \leq 0.01$). On the other hand, a significant difference was observed between the two groups regarding parenting stress. Marital satisfaction was not enhanced in the post-test and the follow-up stage. However, training could enhance the resilience of the experimental group.

The worthiness of a group-oriented program for the parents of children with dyslexia was demonstrated by Multhauf, Buschmann and Soellner (2016). In random order, thirty-nine children with dyslexia and their mothers were assigned to either a cognitive behavior therapy group or a waiting list control group. The intervention was for three months. Assessments were performed before, immediately after, and three months post-intervention. The effectiveness of this program (partial $\eta^2 = .091$) was evident, and this was primarily attributed to the reduction of parenting stress, dyslexia-specific stress, and enhancement of parental competencies. However, effects were not immediate after intervention but were seen three months later, indicating a delayed effect.

In an experimental study by Multhauf, Buschmann and Soellner (2016), 39 mothers of children with reading and/or spelling problems were randomly assigned to either a training group (TG) or a waiting list control group (WG). TG mothers

participated in the training; the WG received no intervention. Behavioural problems were measured pre-test, post-test, and three months after intervention by the parent version of the "Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire" (SDQ). Mothers in the TG reported more improvement in behavioural problems from pre- to post-test. Furthermore, they perceived short and long-term reduction in emotional and social problems and an improvement in pro-social behaviour. The study shows positive transfer effects of the program on parental perception of the child's behavioural problems.

Pourebrahim & Doniamaly (2021) compared parental stress, negative emotions and cognitive emotion regulation strategies in mothers of children with and without learning disabilities. The study method was casual-comparative. The study population consisted of all mothers of children with and without learning disability (each group of 90 mothers). The sample of the study was chosen using the convenient sampling method. The data were analysed using a multivariate analysis of variance. The results showed that the levels of parenting stress, negative emotions, and maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies for mothers of children with learning disability were higher than for mothers of children without learning disability. Also, adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies for mothers of children without learning disability were higher than for mothers of children with learning disability.

Bonifacci et al. (2014) examined the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural profiles of parents of children with dyslexia. A group of 40 parents of children with dyslexia (PDys) was compared to a group of 40 parents of children with typical development. The two parent groups differed neither in socio-economic status nor in non-verbal IQ. Participants were measured for cognitive (IQ, range of digits) and literacy (reading fluency and accuracy), phonological awareness, and verbal fluency. The

questionnaires dealt with reading the history, parental stress, family functioning, anxiety, and depression. The PDys group performed worse in all literacy measures and more often reported a history of poor reading skills; they also showed more parental distress. There were no differences between the two groups in terms of depression or family function and no differences between mothers and fathers. The results suggested that PDys have a cognitive profile consistent with the broader dyslexia phenotype (i.e., reading disability and poor phonological awareness), while, considering the emotional profile, the effects of dyslexia on the family system were limited to parental stress related to the perception of having a child with special needs.

Discussion

The aim of the study was "To develop a current state of understanding regarding parental stress among parents of children with learning disability". As evident from the literature review, the majority of research suggests that parents of children with learning disability experience parental stress. There was a negative correlation between a mother's mental health and parental stress (Mohammadipour, Dasht and Hooman, 2021). Bonifacci et al. (2019) found that parental stress was predicted by lower socio-economic status (SES), the number of family members, and higher ADHD symptoms. Anuar et al. (2021) found no significant difference between fathers and mothers with regard to their stress levels. He also reported significant differences in parental stress depending on race, educational background, social level and occupation. Comorbidities must be considered while evaluating parental stress. Pouillet and Wendland (2021) suggest that only when a child has other co-morbid problems in addition to dyslexia does this lead to a considerable burden on the parents. Parents of children with learning disability also experience loneliness when there is a lack of support from health care providers and trainers.

Comparative Studies between Parents of children with learning disability and Parents of typically developing children: The study by Moideen and Mathai (2018) found that mothers of children with learning disabilities experience more stress compared to typically developing children. Similar results were yielded in the studies of Carotenuto et al. (2017), Pourebrahim and Domiamaly (2021), and Bonifacci et al. (2014). Since such parents differ from the parents of typically developing children, we can be certain that parents of children with learning disability deserve special evaluation and care.

Factors associated with parental stress: Chan and Mo (2021) discovered that individual, family, social and cultural, and school factors contribute to parental stress. Anand and Khan (2020) identified in a phenomenological study that there are various reasons for the burden and stress of parents of children with learning disabilities. When functionally there is only a single caregiver, i.e. when the burden is not shared, the parent experiences stress. The parent gets exhausted in meeting the demands and expectations of the child. It is vital that both the mother and the father accept their role and its meaning for their child. Rather than denying the situation, parents should accept that their roles are challenging but that they cannot step back from their responsibilities as parents. It was also found that with no free time left, the extra hours of parental engagement affected their relationship with their spouse and family. The lives of the parents of children with learning disabilities become complicated as they have to handle work and family and both require a lot of labour. This results in feelings of depression, low self-esteem, and low motivation in life. Parents of children with learning disability feel embarrassed and unhappy while discussing their child's academics. Another reason is that mothers of disabled children have to bear negative comments from family members and are still victims of cultural taboos. Parents also face difficulty keeping

up with the cost of rehabilitation programs while meeting their child's daily needs. The overwhelming duties and demands of parenting make them frustrated, irritated, and depressed, which somehow affects their well-being.

Poulet and Wendland (2021) explained that parents are confronted with various problems on a daily basis, such as having to spend a lot of time with their children to help with school work. As parents spend more time with the child, the quality of their marriage, their love, and togetherness with each other deteriorate. Disputes and disagreements about the child's upbringing are likely to happen between parents. The professional career of the parents can be adversely affected. They might get engulfed by feelings of culpability and apprehension about the future. Still, as reported in the study by Poulet and Wendland (2021), they have a positive sense of parental competence. They recognise that despite having dyslexia, their child has strong abilities in other areas.

While Behar (2017) indicates that there is a strong negative correlation between parental stress and self-efficacy, Auriemma et al. (2017) suggested that parents' self-efficacy was not a significant predictor of parenting stress. In contrast, the perception of the severity of a child's learning disability was a significant predictor. There is a direct link between parental stress and behaviour problems in children, according to the research of Mohammadipour, Dasht and Hooman (2021). As found in the study of Ali et al. (2018), 90 percent of parents of children with dyslexia reported high levels of parental stress related to their children's behavior problems.

Dyslexia is a major stressor that adversely affects the mother-child parenting interaction. Poulet and Wendland (2021) suggested that parents of children with LD tend to be overly involved, protective, and supportive towards the child, which can dampen the parent-child relationship. However, according to

Bonifacci et al. (2014), the effects of dyslexia on the family system were limited to the stress of parents associated with the perception of a child with special needs.

Coping Strategies adopted by Parents: Anuar et al. (2021) and Caronuto et al. (2017) reported that parents of children with learning disabilities often use emotion-based coping mechanisms. Parents who use emotion-focused coping strategies for their children with learning disabilities are more likely to feel parental stress (Anuar et al., 2021). Nordin and Husain (2020) discovered that stress was related to the ability coping ability of self-distraction. Chan and Mo (2021) also identified four coping mechanisms that parents employ: Placing More Value on Children's "Other Strengths", Cultural and Religious Beliefs to Reframe Current Situation, Active Communication with Teachers, and Enhance Support from Spouses.

Interventions: Parents need to understand and adjust to their child's condition while controlling their own stress. According to Bakir and Demirli (2020), parent stress decreases as self-compassion and family support grow. Therefore, it is necessary to support parents in coping with their stress. This can be done through a well-coordinated network of professionals and teachers specially trained in handling various aspects of learning disability and its impacts.

On review, the following three interventions were found to have elements to address the parental stress of parents of children with learning disability. 1). Park et al. (2020) found that the Stress Management and Resiliency Training- Relaxation Response Resiliency Programme (SMART-3RP), a virtual programme designed to meet the needs of parents of children with learning and attentional disabilities, has been found to be an effective intervention for parents of children with learning disabilities, as it is associated with improvement in distress, resilience, stress coping, depression and anxiety, social support,

and empathy. 2). Multhauf, Buschmann and Soellner (2016) examined the effectiveness of CBT-based group therapy in reducing parental stress in children with dyslexia. Although no immediate effect was observed, a delayed effect was noted three months after the intervention. 3) According to a study by Kaveh and Keramati (2017), training in resilience program can reduce parental stress. The significant difference observed between the experimental and control group indicates that a resilience program can help parents of children with learning difficulties build resilience and improve their quality of life.

Covid-19 and Parental Stress: Research was also conducted during the Covid-19 epidemic to better understand the problems faced by children with dyslexia and their parents. Compared to the days before the quarantine, the parents were experiencing more stress (Soriano-Ferrer et al., 2021). Parents were reported to have difficulty in establishing study routines. They were worried about the teacher's professional skills and the child's learning and school success, motivation and interest in reading, and peer relations.

Conclusion

All parents of children with learning disabilities should be screened for parental distress, as they risk developing it. More modes of intervention need to be done on a broader population. Developing adaptive coping strategies in such parents might also be emphasised. Both child and parents deserve more acceptance and support from other family members, mental health professionals, and teachers. Services such as counselling and social support groups will benefit them. As the literature suggests that covid 19 has more negative impacts on both children and parents, those are to be mitigated.

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