Level of Parental Stress and Associating Factors of Stress in Parents of Children with Autism

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ABSTRACT:
This study was conducted to analyze parental stress' levels and factors contributing to parental stress of children with autism. Data was collected from eighty real parents (forty mothers and forty fathers) of forty children with autism from five institutes dealing with special children in Pakistan using the Parental Stress Catalog and Parental Stress Scale. Data was analyzed on SPSS. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied. Substantial stress was found among parents of autistic children who increase when their children grow up. Different factors were found which cause high or low levels of stress. Mothers encountered greater stress than fathers at each phase so they need to have special attention by psychologists. There is a serious requirement to additionally investigate the impact of developmental disorders on parents which would have technical significance for remedial involvement with at-risk families.

Keywords: Parental stress, autism, family types, ordinal position

1. Introduction

Autism is a complex developmental disorder distinguished by a certain level of communication and social interaction difficulties. Atypical activity and behavior patterns, such as trouble transitioning between activities, attention to detail, and strange reactions to sensations, are additional traits (World Health Organization: WHO, 2025). It has been estimated by experts in 2021 that

around 1 in 127 persons had autism worldwide (Global Burden of Disease Study 2021 Autism Collaborators, 2024; GBD 2021 Autism Collaborators, 2025).

Autism is a brain developmental disorder that may be identified at two years of age (Mayo Clinic, 2025; Srinivasan et al., 2025). It is more common than previously estimated; in developing countries (Hossain et al., 2017), its prevalence is .9 by 1000 (Zeidan et al., 2022) and its awareness is lacking (Ahmed et al., 2023). Estimation entails an increase of autism in Pakistan with figures depicting a ratio as one in fifty-nine children, as roughly calculated to 1.7 million children with autism (Junaidi, 2019). In Pakistan, 350,000 individuals fall anywhere on extremely introverted issues i.e. autism. This proportion is rising through seventeen to eighteen percent per annum. It has been assessed by specialists that in Pakistan 400,000 children are suffering from autism. This number is not constant; it is increasing with time (Shamsi, 2019).

Parenting of autistic children puts parents at risk for long-term stress (Dijkstra-de Neijs et al., 2026). It is witnessed that parents of autistic children exhibit different mental problems stemming from pressures of parenting. These psychological pressures become visible through anxiety, depression, and hopelessness (Li et al., 2022). Demanding parental role intensifies psychological strain on parents. Consequently, they undergo pressure. A prime reason for originating stress is their kid's stipulation (Sartor et al., 2023). Numerous parents suffer from stress and frustration (Bradley et al., 2024; Greenlee et al., 2023). Psychological functioning of any mother is negatively affected by having an autistic child in her family unit (Li et al., 2022). Research shows that there is no single stress factor affecting families with autistic children. Rather, a compilation of multiple demands contributes to their stress (Cheng et al., 2022). Both moms and dads of autistics went through stress. Dealing with autistic youngsters can turn out to be a groundbreaking thing for parents because they struggle to accept their broken dream and try to think rationally (Sartor et al., 2022).

2. Methodology

Design

It was a quantitative research and a survey was carried out.

Participants

Participants included eighty real parents (40 moms and 40 dads) of 40 children with autism from five institutes for special children in Lahore, Pakistan.

Instruments

Data was collected by using the Parental Stress Catalog and Parental Stress Scale. Parental Stress Catalog was developed by researchers and after preparing it, experts checked it for validity; its reliability was found through alpha and obtained 0.875 value. The parental Stress Scale was developed by Jones in 1995 and its reliability was 0.83.

Data Collection

The researcher downloaded a list of institutions dealing with autistic children in Lahore. Phone calls were done to institutes to get information regarding autistic children. Five institutions were shortlisted where researchers went one by one to get permission to conduct research. The researcher approached respondents with the administration's help and collected the required information from them.

Ethical Considerations

The relevant institutional review committee granted ethical approval prior to the study's execution. Each participant gave their informed consent, and participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were made aware that they might leave at any moment without incurring any penalty. By eliminating identifying information and publishing data in aggregate form, confidentiality and anonymity were preserved. Every piece of information gathered was safely kept and utilized only for study. Special consideration was given to the sensitive

nature of parental stress, and participants were allowed to decline answering any question that caused discomfort.

Data Analysis

It was done through SPSS. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied. Mean±SD were found. To discover differences between groups, independent samples t-test, paired-samples t-test, and ANOVA was applied. Higher scores represented higher parental stress.

3. Results

This study highlighted that parents of autistic children are frequently stressed which also takes a toll on their family relationships due to their demanding parental role. The nature of a child's disability is an important factor contributing to how parents deal with it. For instance, earlier studies claim that parents of children with disabling stipulations and illness are extra susceptible to higher rates of depression and psychological distress. This study indicated different encounters of parents related to family systems, parental ages, educational status, occupations, monthly earnings, children's ages, sexes, siblings, and ordinal positions depending on their child's disability that is autism.

Studies showed high stress' levels in moms when contrasted to dads. This might be on grounds that Pakistani traditions often expect men to hide their feelings in the open. Though, females are thought to be extra expressive in light of distressing incidents. Moreover, because of social comprehension of the major duty of child-care lye on moms, so they encounter extra pressure if their children have autism.

Table 1. Comparison of parental stress according to different characteristics

Characteristics		*Mothers*		*Fathers*		*Values*	
	n	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*P*
Age of children with autism (years)							
3-6	24	71.5	7.8	60.8	3.9	4.40	<.001
7-10	11	72.7	2.7	62.3	7.7	6.53	<.001
11-14	5	74	3.6	63	4.2	16.50	<.001
Gender of children with autism							
Male	32	69	7.96	59.25	5.65	6.74	<.001
Female	8	72.91	5.75	63.06	6.45	2.98	0.1
Siblings of children with autism							
None	7	74.57	6.75	64.14	5.18	4.67	.003
One	17	72.76	4.57	62.58	6.88	5.66	<.001
Two	16	70.37	7.58	61.18	6.54	3.54	.003
Ordinal position of children with autism							
1st	21	70.4	6.3	60.3	6.2	9.54	<.001
2nd	14	71	10.2	63.2	4.7	2.23	0.50
3rd	5	73.5	5.2	65	6.5	2.05	0.10
Family System							
Nuclear	23	71.9	7.2	64.2	5.8	4.16	<.001
Joint	17	72.4	5.2	59.8	6.5	7.69	<.001

Patriarchal	22	72.91	4.7	61.32	6.4	8.13	<.001
Matriarchal	3	67.3	12.9	61.3	4	1	0.40
Bilateral	15	71.9	7	63.9	6.8	3.09	0.01

Those parents whose child was between 11-14 years undergone extra stress than others whose child was in any other age group. The psychological well-being of parents was inversely related to their child's age. When their child grew up, parents exhibited higher levels of stress. This phenomenon can be explained by fact that an increase in a child's age leads parents to embrace reality about their child's future and outcome leading to increased mental pressure. It becomes harder to take care of an elder child as his behavioral problems increase, feeding into low ratings of parental well-being.

Table 2.Comparison of parental stress concerning their child's gender, siblings, ordinal position

Scales	Gender			Siblings				Ordinal position			
	Males	Females	Values	No sibling	One sibling	Two siblings	Values	1st child	2nd child	3rd child	Values
	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	t	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	f	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	f
PSC (Mothers)	113±18.9	124.3±10.8	2.25* (0.03)	116.7±11.4	119.9 ± 14.6	126.63 ± 11.9	1.79 (0.18)	120.7 ± 14.6	122.8 ±10.1	125.6 ± 17.6	0.30 (0.74)
PSC (Fathers)	101.6±14.7	113.0±11.5	2.38* (0.03)	109.2±12.2	108.8 ± 14.7	113.5 ± 11.2	0.60 (0.55)	109.8 ± 14.9	110.7 ±11.3	114.8 ± 6.9	0.29 (0.74)
PSS (Mothers)	69.0±8.0	72.9±5.8	1.59 (0.12)	74.6±6.7	72.7 ± 4.6	70.4 ± 7.6	1.23 (0.31)	70.4 ± 6.3	71 ± 10.2	73.5 ± 5.2	1.1 (0.35)
PSS (Fathers)	59.2±5.7	63.1±6.5	1.53 (0.14)	64.2±5.2	62.6 ± 6.9	61.2 ± 6.5	0.53 (0.59)	60.3 ± 6.2	63.2 ± 4.7	65 ± 6.5	2.5 (0.09)
t-value of PSC	7.97* (0.000)	2.59* (0.036)	-	-	-	-	-	7.01 (0.00)	5.29 (0.00)	1.46 (0.22)	-
t-value of PSS	6.74 (0.00)	2.98 (0.02)	-	-	-	-	-	9.54 (0.00)	2.23 (0.45)	2.05 (0.10)	-

* Significant at 5%

Parents of female children face higher stress levels in comparison to male children. These results hold great meaning in Pakistani society because females' parents are usually extra worried concerning their future especially marriage. Their menstrual issue is demanding for mothers because they need to give additional time/care to their girls.

Those moms and dads whose children had siblings are more stressed as compared to those who had no siblings. It was so the account of the greater part of parents' consideration that necessities of their typical children were eclipsed by serious concentration on their atypical child. Those parents whose child was on 3rd number in her/his family were more stressed; as compared to those whose child was on 1st or 2nd number.

Table 3. Distribution of parental stress concerning their age, education, profession & monthly income

Scales		26-35 yrs		36-45 yrs		46-56 yrs		Values	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	f	p
PSC	Mothers	121.4	14.433	123.07	11.88	-	-	38	0.71
	Fathers	114.7	11.4	109.2	13.9	108.0	6.2	0.80	0.46
PSS	Mothers	72.07	5.08	73.6	6.8	-	-	38	0.43
	Fathers	62.9	5.2	62.3	7.2	60.0	3.5	0.24	0.79

Scales		Under Matric		Undergraduate		Graduate		Postgraduate		Values	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	f	p
PSC	Mothers	120.5	13.8	124.8	10.7	119.3	18.0	123.6	9.5	0.37	0.77
	Fathers	-	-	113.83	5.04	110.40	12.96	110.13	14.33	0.82	0.19
PSS	Mothers	71.75	7.1	73.4	4.1	72.8	6.5	70.85	7.4	0.33	0.81
	Fathers	-	-	60.83	4.54	63.90	5.53	62.00	7.18	0.62	0.48

Scales		Non working		Working		Officer		Business man		Values	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	f	p
PSC	Mothers	123.1	13.5	116	11.7	-	-	-	-	1.46	0.24
	Fathers	-	-	-	-	110	13.4	112.31	11.86	0.99	0.61
PSS	Mothers	72.4	6.4	70.7	6.7	-	-	-	-	0.37	0.55
	Fathers	-	-	-	-	63	6.89	60.85	5.24	0.28	0.33

Scales		No income		<20,000Rs.		20,000-40,000 Rs.		40000-60000Rs.		>60000Rs.		Values	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	f	P
PSC	Mothers	123.1	13.5	-	-	116	11.7	-	-	-	-	1.46	0.24
	Fathers	-	-	65.4	5	63	5	61.1	7.5	60.8	5.7	1.1	0.36
PSS	Mothers	72.38	6.3	-	-	70.7	6.7	-	-	-	-	0.37	0.55
	Fathers	-	-	118.3	4.24	114	7.8	104.71	15.57	112.2	11.1	2.9	0.05

- Not applicable

The level of parental stress rose with the increase in their age. The level of mothers' stress doesn't change despite their education. Though most fathers were literate; even then they went through stress. Those mothers who were working had lower stress levels as compared to those who were not working. Fathers experienced greater stress either they are officers or businessmen. Those mothers who were not earning had higher stress levels than those who were earning. Those fathers who had low income went through higher stress' levels.

Table 4. Comparison of parental stress in terms of family types

Scales	Conjugal (n=17)		Consanguine (n=23)		Values	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t	p
PSC (Mothers)	121.1	13.9	123.3	12.8	-0.51	0.61
PSC (Fathers)	113.1	12.1	107.5	13.5	1.38	0.17
PSS (Mothers)	71.9	7.2	72.4	5.2	-0.24	0.81
PSS (Fathers)	64.2	5.8	59.8	6.5	2.26*	0.03
t-value of PSC	3.89		13.96			
p-value of PSC	0.01		0.00			
t-value of PSS	4.16		7.69			
p-value of PSS	0		0			

Scales	Patriarchal		Matriarchal		Bilateral		Values	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	f	p
PSC (Mothers)	122.8	13.6	119.7	21.7	121.3	12.2	0.10	0.91
PSC (Fathers)	109.82	11.8	120.3	7.2	110.2	14.9	0.90	0.42
PSS (Mothers)	72.91	4.7	67.3	12.9	71.9	7	1.03	0.37
PSS (Fathers)	61.32	6.4	61.3	4	63.9	6.8	0.77	0.47
t-value of PSC	8.55		-0.08		4.98			
p-value of PSC	0.00		0.95		0.00			
t-value of PSS	8.13		1		3.09			
p-value of PSS	0.00		0.43		0.01			

Those moms who belonged to the consanguine family system experienced greater stress; whereas those dads belonging to this family system had a low level of stress. The majority of parents were associated with a patriarchal family system and moms experienced greater stress than dads.

4. Conclusion

Substantial stress was found in parents of autistic children. Their mental wellbeing was inversely related to their child's age; as with an increase of their child's age, their stress level also increased. Moms encountered greater stress than dads at each phase. It was concluded from this study that parents of a female child faced higher stress' levels than a male child. The existence or nonexistence of their kids' siblings was another associating factor of stress. The ordinal position of autistics was also conversely related to parental stress.

Though most parents were literate; even then they went through stress. Mothers' stress levels rose while fathers' stress level falls; with the increase in their age. Those mothers who were homemakers had greater stress than those who were job-oriented. Parents with less income exhibited higher levels of stress. Most of them were from a patriarchal family system so, they have undergone extra stress. Those moms who belonged to the consanguine family system and those dads who belonged to the conjugal family system were very stressed out. Further, this research can help investigate more factors of parental stress.

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