STRESS AND COPING IN FAMILIES OF A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY

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Experiences of Families of Children with Disabilities

• The stress of caring for a newborn child is increased when disability is present

• A disability diagnosis may cause feelings of grief and loss, disappointment, anger, and guilt

• Families experience an increase in time, financial, social, and physical demands
Parenting Stress

- Largest contributors to parenting stress:
  - Severity of behaviour problems
  - More difficult caregiving tasks
  - Advocating for their child
  - Physical and communication limitations of their child

- As children grow older, experiences of stress change making the school years a uniquely challenging time
Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping

• Families experience a range of outcomes
• In the absence of adaptive coping, parental stress can have an effect on the child, the parent, and the family as a whole
• Those who experience more positive outcomes utilise positive external and internal psychological resources
  • Social Support
  • Cognitive Coping
Social Support

• Social support serves as a buffer against stress and negative outcomes

• Parents with greater levels of social support experience lower levels of stress

• Parents of children with special needs often face social isolation from their informal social support

• Familial and informal social support are the most important to parents, and should be encouraged
Cognitive Coping Strategies

• Problem-focused coping style
  • Reduce stress by altering the problem or the situation
  • Found to be related to lower stress levels than emotion-focused coping

• Positive Reframing
  • Cognitive appraisal (interpretation) of a child’s disability is related to parent stress levels
  • Parents who are optimistic, experience less overall stress
  • Defining the situation as out of control is associated with higher parent stress
Conclusion

• Parents of children with disabilities face a unique set of parenting stressors

• Research has identified some common characteristics amongst those who experience positive outcomes

• Through this understanding, we can identify parents at a greater risk of negative outcomes through recognising maladaptive coping strategies

• Assisting parents to develop adaptive coping strategies could and should be a part of any early intervention for children with disabilities
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Key References


