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PSYCHOLOGICAL BURDEN OF PARENTING: ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, AND STRESS IN PARENTS OF EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

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Abstract

The present study aimed to examine the levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among parents of exceptional children, with reference to the gender of the child. Exceptional children include those with physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, which often require additional care and attention, placing significant psychological demands on parents. A total of 480 parents participated in the study, with 240 parents of male exceptional children and 240 parents of female exceptional children, selected using the random sampling method.

Data were collected using the Anxiety, Depression, and Stress Scale developed by Pallavi Bhatnagar and Megha Singh, which measures psychological states reliably and validly. The collected data were analyzed using the independent samples t-test to determine differences between groups. Results indicated that parents of female exceptional children scored significantly higher in anxiety ($t = 6.17, p < 0.01$), depression ($t = 5.82, p < 0.01$), and stress ($t = 2.99, p < 0.01$) compared to parents of male exceptional children. These differences were interpreted as extremely significant for anxiety and depression and very significant for stress, suggesting that child gender plays a role in the psychological well-being of parents.

The findings highlight the need for counseling, parent support groups, and awareness programs to reduce the emotional burden on parents, particularly those raising female exceptional children. Addressing parental mental health is crucial for promoting effective caregiving and enhancing the overall development and adjustment of exceptional children. The study contributes valuable insights for psychologists, educators, and policymakers in planning interventions aimed at improving parental well-being and family functioning.

Keywords: Anxiety, Depression, Stress, Parents, Exceptional Children, Child Gender

1. Introduction

Parenting is a complex and demanding responsibility that involves nurturing, guiding, and supporting a child's growth and development. While every parent experiences challenges in raising children, the demands increase significantly when the child is identified as "exceptional." Exceptional children may include those with physical disabilities, intellectual impairments, learning difficulties, developmental disorders, or behavioral challenges. Such conditions often require special care, additional resources, and continuous emotional involvement from parents, which can create considerable psychological and emotional strain.

One of the most common issues observed among parents of exceptional children is anxiety. Anxiety arises from uncertainties about the child's future, concerns over social acceptance, financial burdens, and the constant demand for special attention. Parents may worry about their child's educational opportunities, social integration, and overall well-being. This ongoing state of worry can lead to emotional exhaustion, decreased confidence, and impaired decision-making.

Along with anxiety, depression is also a significant psychological challenge faced by these parents. Depression often stems from unmet expectations, repeated difficulties in managing the child's behavior, lack of adequate support systems, and societal stigma. When parents are unable to fulfill personal, social, or professional roles due to caregiving responsibilities, feelings of helplessness and dissatisfaction may emerge. Prolonged depression can affect family harmony, communication, and the parent-child relationship.



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Another important dimension of mental health in this context is stress. Parenting an exceptional child requires balancing household responsibilities, medical needs, educational adjustments, and often financial limitations. The continuous demand to provide emotional, physical, and social support can overwhelm parents, leading to chronic stress. Stress not only affects their own health but also influences the quality of care they provide to the child. High stress levels may contribute to marital conflicts, social withdrawal, and reduced coping capacity.

Research in the field of child development and psychology highlights that parental mental health plays a vital role in shaping the developmental outcomes of children. When parents experience high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, their ability to create a supportive and nurturing environment may be compromised. This, in turn, impacts the emotional security and social adjustment of the child. Therefore, studying the psychological challenges of parents of exceptional children is essential for understanding their needs and designing interventions that promote mental well-being. The present study aims to explore the levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among parents of exceptional children. It further examines whether these psychological dimensions vary according to different variables such as gender of the parents and gender of the child. Understanding these factors will provide valuable insights for psychologists, educators, and policymakers to develop effective support systems and counseling strategies. Ultimately, addressing the mental health of parents is crucial not only for their well-being but also for the holistic development of exceptional children.

2. Anxiety, Depression, and Stress in Parents of Exceptional Children

Raising an exceptional child presents unique emotional, social, and psychological challenges for parents. Exceptional children, who may have physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, require greater attention, care, and support compared to typically developing children. This increased responsibility often leads parents to experience high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress.

Anxiety in parents commonly arises from uncertainty about the child's future, worries about educational and social opportunities, and concerns regarding financial and medical needs. Such persistent worry can affect their decision-making and overall emotional well-being.

Depression is another frequent outcome, usually resulting from unmet expectations, difficulties in managing the child's behavior, and limited social or institutional support. Parents may feel helpless when they cannot balance caregiving with personal and professional responsibilities, leading to dissatisfaction and strained family relationships.

Stress emerges as a cumulative effect of continuous caregiving demands, societal stigma, and financial pressures. Prolonged stress not only impacts the health of parents but also reduces their ability to provide effective care.

Understanding these psychological challenges is crucial, as the well-being of parents directly influences the development, adjustment, and happiness of exceptional children. Providing appropriate counseling, guidance, and support systems can significantly reduce these burdens.

3. Recent Conceptualizations of Anxiety, Depression, and Stress in Parents of Exceptional Children

Recent research emphasizes that the psychological challenges faced by parents of exceptional children must be understood in a multidimensional context. **Anxiety** is increasingly viewed not only as a response to uncertainty about the child's future but also as an outcome of systemic pressures such as lack of inclusive education, financial strain, and inadequate health services. Scholars highlight that anxiety in these parents is often chronic, shaped by both internal worries and external barriers.

Depression has been reconceptualized as a result of "expectation–reality gaps." Parents may feel frustrated when their hopes for the child's independence and success clash with the limitations imposed by disability or societal attitudes. Recent perspectives underline that depression is not merely an emotional state but also a reflection of social exclusion, lack of resources, and limited institutional support.

Stress is now seen through a family-systems lens, where caregiving responsibilities affect not only the individual parent but also marital relationships, sibling dynamics, and family cohesion. Researchers suggest that stress among these parents is cumulative, influenced by continuous caregiving demands, stigma, and balancing personal roles.

Overall, current conceptualizations stress the need for holistic interventions that address emotional well-being, social support, and structural inequalities faced by these families.



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4. The Study's Need and Significance

The psychological well-being of parents of exceptional children is an area of growing concern in contemporary research. Parents often experience heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and stress due to the constant demands of caregiving, social stigma, financial burdens, and uncertainty regarding their child's future. These challenges not only affect their own mental health but also influence the quality of care and emotional support they provide to their children. Since parental well-being is closely linked to the developmental, emotional, and social adjustment of exceptional children, it is essential to study these dimensions systematically.

This study holds significance as it highlights the differences in anxiety, depression, and stress levels across variables such as parent gender and child gender. Findings will provide insights for psychologists, educators, and policymakers to design effective support systems, counseling programs, and community-based interventions that strengthen parental resilience and promote the holistic development of exceptional children.

5. Objective of the Study

The following objectives were framed in this study.

1. To compare the level of anxiety in parents of male and female exceptional children.
2. To examine differences in **depression** among parents based on the gender of their exceptional child.
3. To study the variation in stress levels of parents in relation to the gender of their exceptional child.

6. Hypotheses of the Study

The following hypotheses were tested in this study.

1. There is no significant difference in the level of anxiety in parents of male and female exceptional children.
2. There is no significant difference in the level of depression in parents of male and female exceptional children.
3. There is no significant difference in the level of stress in parents of male and female exceptional children.

7. Method and Procedure

7.1 Sample

The sample of the present study consisted only of parents of exceptional children. There were 240 parents in each group, making a total sample of 480 parents. The respondents were selected through the random sampling method to ensure fairness and representativeness.

7.2 Tools

To measure the psychological variables under study, the Anxiety, Depression and Stress Scale developed by Pallavi Bhatnagar and Megha Singh was used. This standardized tool is designed to assess the levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among individuals in a reliable and valid manner. The scale consists of well-structured items that capture the emotional and psychological states of respondents.

For the present research, the scale was administered to parents of exceptional children in order to evaluate their levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. The tool has been widely used in psychological studies and demonstrates satisfactory reliability and validity, making it suitable for the present context. Clear instructions were provided to participants before administration to ensure accurate responses.

7.3 Data Collection Method

For the present study, data were collected from parents of exceptional children using the survey method. Standardized psychological tools were administered to measure anxiety, depression, and stress. The questionnaires were distributed personally as well as through schools and institutions working with exceptional children. Before administering the tools, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and their informed consent was obtained.



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Parents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and they were encouraged to answer honestly without any external influence. The researcher-maintained neutrality and provided necessary clarifications whenever required. Data collection was carried out individually and in small groups, depending on the availability and convenience of the parents.

This method ensured systematic, reliable, and unbiased data that could be analyzed statistically to study the psychological differences among groups based on the selected variables.

7.4 Statistical Techniques

For the present study, the t-test was employed as the main statistical technique to examine the differences in anxiety, depression, and stress among parents of exceptional children. The t-test is appropriate when comparing the mean scores of two independent groups to determine whether the observed differences are statistically significant.

In this study, the t-test was applied to analyse:

- Differences based on child gender (parents of male exceptional children and parents of female exceptional children).

The obtained results were interpreted at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significance, ensuring accurate evaluation of the hypotheses. The use of the t-test allowed the researcher to identify whether variations in psychological factors among groups were due to chance or represented meaningful differences.

8. Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Table- 1
Mean Score, SD, SED, t – Value.

VAIREBLE	GROUP	N	MEAN	SD	SED	t – Value	Conclusion
Anxiety	Parents of Male Children	240	13.00	3.6	0.32	6.17**	Extremely Statistically Significant
	Parents of Female Children	240	15.00	3.5			
Depression	Parents of Male Children	240	09.00	3.4	0.34	5.82**	Extremely Statistically Significant
	Parents of Female Children	240	11.00	4.1			
Stress	Parents of Male Children	240	10.00	3.9	0.33	2.99**	Very Statistically Significant
	Parents of Female Children	240	11.00	3.4			
NS= Not Significant							
0.05 = 1.96*, 0.01 = 2.58**							

The table presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and results of the t-test for anxiety, depression, and stress among parents of exceptional children based on the child's gender. Each group consisted of 240 parents, and the results were compared using the independent sample t-test.

- Anxiety: Parents of male children (Mean = 13.00, SD = 3.6) scored lower than parents of female children (Mean = 15.00, SD = 3.5). The calculated t-value (6.17**) is significant at the 0.01 level, indicating an extremely statistically significant difference. This suggests that parents of female exceptional children experience higher anxiety.



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- Depression: Parents of male children (Mean = 9.00, SD = 3.4) scored lower than parents of female children (Mean = 11.00, SD = 4.1). The t-value (5.82**) is also significant at the 0.01 level, showing an extremely statistically significant difference. Hence, parents of female children report higher depression.
- Stress: Parents of male children (Mean = 10.00, SD = 3.9) scored slightly lower than parents of female children (Mean = 11.00, SD = 3.4). The obtained t-value (2.99**) is significant at the 0.01 level, indicating a very statistically significant difference. Thus, stress is higher among parents of female exceptional children.

The results clearly demonstrate that **parents of female exceptional children experience significantly higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress compared to parents of male exceptional children.** These findings highlight the need for targeted psychological support and counseling, especially for families raising female exceptional children.

9. Findings

The findings of the present study are reported below.

1. **Parents of female exceptional children have significantly higher anxiety** compared to parents of male exceptional children, indicating that child gender influences parental emotional well-being.
2. **Depression levels are significantly greater in parents of female exceptional children** than in parents of male exceptional children, showing that caregiving demands and expectations may vary according to the child's gender.
3. **Stress is also higher in parents of female exceptional children**, with results showing a statistically significant difference, suggesting that raising female exceptional children places greater psychological strain on parents.

10. Suggestions

1. **Counselling Support:** Regular counselling and guidance programs should be organized for parents of exceptional children, especially those with female children, to help them manage anxiety, depression, and stress effectively.
2. **Parent Support Groups:** Schools and community organizations should establish parent support groups where families can share experiences, exchange coping strategies, and receive emotional support.
3. **Awareness and Sensitization:** Awareness campaigns should be conducted to reduce social stigma and promote a supportive environment for exceptional children and their parents, thereby easing parental stress and depression.

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