



# A Study on Parental Stress and Child Characteristics

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study was to investigate the different ways in which child features, parental stress, and parental involvement are related to one another. One hundred households with children in the preschool age range and two parents each participated in the study. Data on parental participation, perceptions of child temperament, and perceived levels of parental stress were gathered using a combination of self-reporting and interviews with the parents. The findings of the analyses showed substantial relationships between child temperament and parental stress for both mothers and fathers, although these associations were relatively distinct from one another. It was revealed that fathers have significantly stronger connections between their assessments of their children's temperaments and their engagement than mothers do. The correlations that were found between a child's temperament and parental stress and participation were found to vary, depending on the gender of both the child and the parent. The findings are examined in terms of future study on father engagement, as well as in terms of programmes meant to encourage fathers to assume more active parental roles.

**KEYWORDS:** Autism spectrum disorder Parenting stress Family Meta-analysis<sup>1</sup>.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Negative parenting behaviours (such as less nurturing) and children's delayed social competence and increased internalising problems have been linked to parenting stress. Parenting stress is defined as parents' perception of lack of support (e.g., spousal support), children's difficult behaviour, and feelings of incompetence in the parenting role. With a few notable exceptions, the majority of research on the effects of stress in the parenting role on the well-being of both parents and children has focused on samples drawn from the middle class. These exceptions primarily investigate the effects of parenting stress on mothers with lower incomes. The presumption that males are less active in the day-to-day activities of parenting could be one of the factors contributing to this omission. New research, on the other hand, has indicated that the amount of time spent caring for children by fathers has increased over time, and as a result, fathers may also suffer the stresses of parenting. It is not well understood how the stress of parenting, which is caused by the day-to-day needs of parenting, could influence the parenting practises and child outcomes of low-income men. This stress is caused by the day-to-day demands of parenting. In the current study, we address this gap by testing whether or not fathers' parenting stress affects their parenting (i.e., engagement with child) and whether or not father engagement, in turn, affects child social development in a sample of low-income African American fathers and their toddlers. The participants in this study were fathers who had a toddler in their household.

The act of parenting a child, regardless of the child's circumstances, can be a stressful experience; yet, studies have shown that families, on average, are resilient and can adapt in order to keep their equilibrium and deal with the difficulties of life. On the other hand, studies have hypothesised that families in whom a kid has been identified with a disability are negatively affected and, as a result, experience greater instability and dysfunction than "normal" families do. The concept of parental stress is the one that has been researched the most extensively out of all the different approaches to the study of families that are attempting to comprehend the experience of having a kid with a disability. In particular, it has been common practise for researchers to begin their studies by claiming that households in which there is a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are subjected to a higher level of stress in comparison to families in which there is no child diagnosed with ASD. Investigations on the causes and effects of stress in parents are necessary because they give a framework for determining the factors that are most likely to be responsible for the occurrence of stress. Once we have a better understanding of the factors that contribute to stress, we will be able to



develop more tailored interventions to assist families and to make it easier for families to function. As a result, it is important to pause and take stock of the current research on parenting stress that is focused on families of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), in order to determine whether or not these families are suffering the most stress in contrast to other families.

### **What is Parenting Stress?**

The sensation of being troubled or uneasy as a direct result of the duties and responsibilities associated with the role of a parent is a simplification of the concept known more formally as "parenting stress." Despite the difficulty of establishing a connection between stress and distress, many articles that investigate the impact of a child with a disability on the family use one or two factors associated with distress as a primary indicator of stress. This is done despite the fact that there are many factors that can cause distress. It is essential to keep in mind that emotional strain can be caused by a variety of factors that are unrelated to the experience of parenting a kid who has a handicap (e.g., pre-existing pathology or other environmental stressors). It is vital, as a result, to be aware of the limitations of our definition of stress, as well as the fact that it is an oversimplification to quantify stress based on only one or two symptoms of discomfort.

According to the broad model of stress proposed by Folkman and Lazarus, stress arises as a consequence of the interaction of a person (or family) with their environment. When a person comes to the conclusion that the environmental stressors they are experiencing have depleted their resources, they will activate coping mechanisms in order to regain normal functioning. Stress is the result, however, if the individual's coping strategies are maladaptive or they are unable to fulfil the additional expectations that are being placed on them. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the effects of stress may include physical and/or psychological symptoms such as depression, fatigue, restlessness, elevated neural and hormonal pathways, or an increased risk for ulcers or heart diseases. One of the reasons stress is individual and, as a result, subjective is that it is a factor. Parallelement, parenting stress occurs when a family is unable to restore functioning after the introduction of a stressor (related to parenting, such as a child's challenging behaviour) by engaging in their regular family-coping strategies. This can occur when a family is unable to restore functioning following the introduction of a stressful event.

### **Conceptualization Of Father Involvement**

Because of the growing focus on dads, many concerns have been raised regarding the methods in which fathers are involved in their children's lives and the reasons why some fathers choose to be more involved than others. Using the multidimensional Lamb model is one way to approach the problem of how to understand father participation. This model conceptualises parental involvement as consisting of three distinct categories: (a) interaction (parent interacting with child in one-on-one activities such as playing with him or her, feeding him or her, etc.); (b) accessibility (parent is physically and psychologically available to child); and (c) responsibility (parent assumes responsibility for the welfare and care of child—for example, making arrangements for child care, knowing when the child needs to go to the paediatrician).

Even though this conceptualization has emerged in recent years as the basis for a significant amount of the research on father involvement, it should not be treated as an exhaustive accounting of all of the ways that fathers can be involved with their children. There are many different ways that fathers can be involved with their children. Others have investigated a more comprehensive variety of features of father engagement, including cognitive and affective components. They have also investigated fathering behaviour from generative fathering, social constructionist, and social capital perspectives, among others. In addition, there has been a recent call for more emphasis to be paid to the quality of fathers' connection with their children, in addition to the amount of fathers' involvement, within the body of research that is devoted to studying father involvement. However, in order to have a complete comprehension of the effects that father engagement has on children and the family unit, one must have a comprehension of both the amount and the quality of components of father involvement. In addition, it is a well-known reality that the majority of fathers do not live up to the current fatherhood ideal of the father in the role of co-parent. While some fathers choose to take on a more active role in the upbringing of their children, other fathers approach parenting from a more traditional perspective on what it means to be a father. This conceptualization offers a helpful way to examine aspects of father



involvement that are crucial for understanding why some fathers choose to take on a more active role. This question serves as the primary focus of the current research.

### **Mother Stress and Child Activity Level**

Parenting is a profession that unquestionably involves patience, flexibility, and determination on the part of the parent. But are there certain children that are more challenging to raise than others? For a very long time, researchers have been aware of the possible influences that a child's conduct might have on parenting. Suarez and Baker (1997) discovered that mothers of children with externalising behaviour problems expressed greater negative feelings about parenting than mothers of children who were compliant. This was contrasted to moms of children who were compliant. Current research examining the relationship between child characteristics and parental behaviours focuses on the extremes of child temperament, such as children who have exceptionalities like Attention Deficit Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or other neuropsychological disorders. This is because these children are more likely to have a parent who exhibits one or more of the behaviours being studied. Most notably, research has focused a great deal of attention on the concept of the difficult temperament, which is defined as an irregular rhythm, a negative withdrawal response to new stimuli, no or slow adaptation to change, and powerful moods that are frequently unpleasant.

### **OBJECTIVE**

- Study on parents stress.
- Study on children characters.

## **II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

One hundred families, most of them were White and middle class, came from two different areas in the Midwest to take part in this study. Participants were recruited by posting recruitment flyers in neighbourhood organisations, newspapers, and other public places such as day care facilities and grocery stores. The following were the inclusion criteria for the study: the age of the oldest child had to be between 3 and 5 years old; both biological parents had to be living in the home with the target child; and the family had to agree to have an assistant visit their home for a twohour interview.

The average ages of the dads were 32.8 years, while the average ages of the mothers were 31.2 years, and the average age of the children was 47.6 months. There were 52 males and 48 females within the group of children that were the target. 37 percent of the families that participated in the study only had one child, while 58 percent had two children and 5 percent had three children. Thirteen percent of the families had combined incomes that were less than \$15,000, sixteen percent of the families had incomes that fell between \$15,000 and \$25,000, twenty-eight percent of the families had incomes that fell between \$25,000 and \$40,000, and forty-three percent of the families had incomes that fell above \$40,000. The dads had a median education level of 16 years, whereas the moms had a median education level of 15 years. Outside employment was held by all one hundred of the fathers and seventy of the moms.

### **Procedure**

This study collected data through a combination of self-reporting and interviews with participants. In order to gather information on topics such as parental responsibility forms of involvement, perceptions of parental stress, and child disposition, a set of questionnaires was used. A time diary interview methodology was employed in order to quantify different forms of involvement, including interaction and accessibility. An initial screening over the phone was done with the relatives of the respondents to see whether or not they satisfied the requirements for participating in the study and to explain what was expected from their involvement. After giving their consent to take part in the study, individuals had a visit to their homes organised with a research assistant. (a) The mother was questioned while the father filled out the questionnaires during this appointment, and (b) the father was interviewed while the mother filled out the questionnaires during this visit. In order to avoid an order effect, the mothers and fathers who participated in the study were asked to complete interviews and questionnaires in equal numbers.



## Measure

### Parenting Stress Index

The Parenting Stress Index (PSI) is a self-report questionnaire that consists of 101 questions and was developed by Abidin in 1995. Its purpose is to identify parent and child characteristics that contribute to stressful parenting and that may place a family at risk for the development of dysfunctional parenting or behaviour problems in the child. The PSI was designed to identify these characteristics. There are five different response categories, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," and higher scores indicate greater levels of stress associated with parenting. Only the sum of six of the subscales from the parent domain were used to determine the amount of stress that was caused by the characteristics of the parents. These subscales were depression, attachment, role restriction, competence, social isolation, and parenthealth. Because of the theoretical possibility of colinearity with the marital quality measure, the subscale assessing one's relationship with one's spouse was omitted from the survey. The total score on all six of the child domain's subscales—adaptability, acceptability, demandingness, mood, distractibility/hyperactivity, and reinforces parent—was used to calculate the amount of stress that parents experience as a result of the characteristics of their children. If the total score for the parent domain is higher than 150 or if the total score for the child domain is higher than 114, there is a need for referral to professional assistance (Abidin, 1995). In a clinical sample consisting of 30 moms, the test–retest reliability over a period of one to three months was calculated to be 0.91 for the whole parent domain and 0.63 for the entire child domain. Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.93 for the whole parent domain and 0.90 for the total child domain in the normative sample of mothers (N = 2633) with children ranging in age from one month to twelve years that Abidin used. Cronbach's alpha varied from 0.83 to 0.86 for the whole parent domain in this study's participants who were either moms or fathers, and it ranged from 0.80 to 0.84 for the entire kid domain. Cronbach's alpha for the parent domain, excluding the spouse subscale, varied from 0.80 to 0.84, which is a little lower than the total parent domain.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Mothers and Fathers and Their Children at Age 7 Years**

	Mothers (n = 62)		Fathers (n = 56)	
	Mean/frequency	SD (%)	Mean/frequency	SD (%)
Parent age (years)	37.68	5.07	40.20	5.77
Parent education (years)	15.16	3.08	15.50	3.92
Occupation*	21.13	15.98	31.16	9.68
Family socioeconomic status	46.6	9.92	47.10	10.11
Child gender (% male)	37	60	33	59
Birth status (% preterm)	25	40	20	36
Birth order (% first born)	31	50	26	47

## DATA ANALYSIS

The Statistical Package for Social Science was used to conduct separate analyses on the demographic information pertaining to mothers and fathers (version 7.5). The level of significance was established at  $p = 0.05$ , with the exception of the applications of correlations; the level of confidence was changed to  $p = 0.01$ , with the goal of reducing the likelihood of obtaining results that are erroneous. Before any analyses were performed, the data were evaluated, and a trend of missing data for ECBI questions concerning behaviours toward siblings in homes with only one kid was discovered. In accordance with Benzie et al(1998) 's methodology, missing values were filled in with 1. In place of the scores at a single moment in time, the averages of the PSI and DAS scores from the preceding three and twelve months were employed as predictors in this study. An average of scores recorded at multiple points in time may be a stronger predictor of outcomes than a single score. This is possibly the case due to the possibility that the persistent nature of environmental problems may have a greater influence on the determination of child developmental outcomes than the intermittent effect of acute problems (Garmez & Masten, 1994). Initial hierarchical regression analyses were conducted separately for mothers and fathers in order to determine which independent variables (PSI parent domain, PSI child domain, DAS, family socioeconomic status, infant birth status [preterm or term], and child gender) best predicted the ECBI intensity and problem scores. These analyses were run to determine which independent variables





(PSI parent domain, PSI child domain, DAS, and family socioeconomic status) best predicted the ECBI intensity and problem scores. The order of entry was chosen in order to determine whether socioeconomic status (Step 2) and child characteristics (Step 3) would add anything additional to what was already explained by the family environmental variables, parenting stress, and marital quality. The order of entry was chosen in order to determine whether or not these factors would add anything additional to what was already explained (Step 1).

### Findings

The scores that mothers and dads obtained on the ECBI, PSI, and DAS are reported in Table 2, along with their respective means and standard deviations. The nonclinical suggested range of values was adhered to by all measurements, resulting in mean scores that were within that range. However, only a fraction of parents reported having scores that were higher than the clinical threshold. We examined the direction and degree of the link between the predictor variables and the ECBI intensity and problem scores of both the mothers and the fathers of the children in our study using Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients.

**TABLE 2: Descriptive statistics for the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI) as well as the average scores for mothers and fathers after three and twelve months on the Parenting Stress Index (PSI) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)**

	Mothers (N = 62)		Fathers* (N = 56)	
	Mean ± SD	Frequency (%) in clinical range	Mean ± SD	Frequency (%) in clinical range
ECBI intensity	98.27 ± 23.66	8 (13%)	101.23 ± 26.04	8 (14%)
ECBI problem	5.55 ± 5.52	7 (11%)	4.85 ± 5.72	5 (9%)
PSI parent domain total	119.18 ± 17.47	2 (3%)	115.91 ± 18.08	2 (4%)
PSI parent domain excluding spouse	102.24 ± 14.96	—	100.12 ± 15.85	—
PSI child domain total	94.94 ± 13.09	6 (10%)	98.61 ± 12.20	9 (16%)
PSI distractibility/hyperactivity	24.80 ± 3.44	—	25.21 ± 2.99	—
DAS	113.13 ± 14.41	16 (26%)	113.80 ± 10.37	14 (25%)

\*N = 55 for fathers' ECBI problem scores.

### III. DISCUSSION

According to the findings of the study, the stress that parents experience as a result of the distractibility of their infants is a modest but consistent predictor of the incidence of childhood behaviour issues for mothers and of the impact that behaviour problems have on mothers and fathers. This association between the stress of parenting brought on by the distractibility of the infant and later behavioural issues may constitute a stable, negative cognitive picture of the child held by the parent, which may have little to do with the traits or behaviours of the child. Olson, Bates, Sandy, and Lanthier (2000) examined mother–child interactions and maternal perceptions of child difficulties, resistance to control, and unresponsiveness to the parent in a longitudinal study of children ranging from infancy to late adolescence. This study followed children from infancy to late adolescence. It was shown that a mother's opinion that her child was emotionally inattentive to her was a consistent predictor of subsequent behaviour difficulties in the child. Other researchers (Nix et al., 1999; Bugental & Johnston, 2000) suggest that these negative cognitive representations of the child may operate at a relatively unaware, automatic level and act as organisers of expectations and guides to behaviour. In other words, these representations may be largely unconscious. These effects may be the result of a negative affect that is directed toward the child, such as anger or irritation, frustration, sadness, contempt, and general anxiety or discomfort, and the child's subsequent imitation and transfer of those interaction styles in relationships with other people (Isley, O'Neil, Clatfelter, & Parke, 1999). These effects may occur as a result of the negative affect that is directed toward the child. For instance, in one study, the negative affect exhibited by fathers in play interaction with their 4- and 5-year-old children was associated with increased verbal and physical aggression reported by the children's



preschool teachers. This was found to be the case even though the fathers themselves did not exhibit any aggressive behaviour (Carson & Parke, 1996). Isley and colleagues (1999) found that higher levels of parental negative affect expressed in same-sex dyads (father to son and mother to daughter) were associated with an increase in teacher- and peer-related behaviour problems measured concurrently and 1 year later, at age 6 years. These findings were based on measurements taken at the age of 6 years. According to the findings of these researchers, negative affect displayed by parents may indicate that they are not effectively encouraging effective emotional regulation in their children.

There is also the possibility that the parents' judgement of their infant's susceptibility to distraction is an accurate and consistent assessment of their child's behaviour throughout time, which would be another plausible reason. If this were the case, the authors of the study hypothesised that there would be a significant correlation between the levels of distractibility and hyperactivity measured by the PSI in infants and the levels of attention deficit and hyperactivity measured by the ECBI in children when they were 7 years old. The items on the PSI that measure distractibility and hyperactivity, such as "My child appears disorganised and is easily distracted" and "Compared to most, my child has more difficulty concentrating and paying attention," are comparable to the items on the ECBI that measure attention deficit and hyperactivity, such as "Has short attention span" and "Is easily distracted." The ECBI intensity-scale items that loaded on the attention deficit/hyperactivity behaviour factor were summed. This was done on the basis of an exploratory factor analysis of the ECBI that was carried out by Burns and Patterson (2000). The correlations between the PSI distractibility and hyperactivity scores and the ECBI attention deficit and hyperactivity behaviour item scores were weak for fathers ( $r = 0.17$ , not significant) and moderate for mothers ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), respectively. These findings offer only a limited amount of support for the argument that stress experienced by parents as a result of their impression of their infant's distractibility is a predictor of attention deficit disorder or hyperactivity later in childhood. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the dependability and validity of the ECBI attention deficit/hyperactivity component has not yet been proved, this explanation cannot be ruled out by the analyses that were carried out here.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The evidence has shown that the levels of child behaviour problems experienced by both groups of parents are pretty similar. As a result, employment status of the mother does not have any direct effect on the amount of stress that mothers experience when parenting their children. In spite of this, the outcomes of this study revealed that the level of stress experienced by stay-at-home mothers is closely linked to the behavioural issues exhibited by children. As a result of the fact that the children in this study all achieved scores that were within the normative range for behavioural outcomes, it is important to emphasise that the sample does not include children who are experiencing significant challenges in the area of behaviour. However, even relatively minor challenges should not be ignored because even seemingly insignificant behavioural issues in childhood can grow significantly more severe in adolescence and adulthood, leading to a wide range of unfavourable outcomes. It is advised that future studies focus on women's personalities, given that moms with different personalities may experience varying degrees of stress as a result of the demands of parenting their children.

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