

Parental Stress and Coping Strategies in Response to the Severity of Symptoms in Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Descriptive Cross-Sectional Study

K.A.V. Kuruppuarachchi^{1*}, B.R.G.T.K. Weerasingha²

¹Department of Nursing, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, 20400, Sri Lanka
ahs17nur003@ahs.pdn.ac.lk
tiliniweerasingha@ahs.pdn.ac.lk

The prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been on the rise, drawing attention to the challenges faced by families with affected children. Understanding the relationship between the severity of symptoms in children with ASD and the resultant stress experienced by parents is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support systems. This study mainly aimed to determine the relationship between parental stress and the severity of symptoms in young children with ASD. Other than that, determine the coping level and correlation between level of parental stress and coping strategies. A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out among 85 parents of children aged 2 to 7 years with ASD at the Psychiatric Clinic of Sirimawo Bandaranayake Specialised Children's Hospital from October to November 2023. Data were collected using an interviewer-administered questionnaire which consisted of socio-demographic characteristics, severity level of ASD, parental stress, and coping strategies. The Autism Parental Stress Index (APSI) was used to measure parental stress and the Brief COPE questionnaire assessed coping strategies utilized by parents. Significance level was set as $p \leq 0.05$. A significant positive correlation ($r = 0.383$, $p = .000$) between the severity of ASD symptoms and parental stress was found. High stress levels were reported in areas related to communication ability (40% of parents often create stress, 8.2% of parents feel unable to cope with the stress) and social development (29.4% of parents are very stressful daily, 5.9% of parents feel unable to cope the stress). Coping strategy analysis revealed predominant use of planning (mean=3.70, SD=0.50), active coping (mean= 3.56, SD=0.48), emotional support (mean= 3.06, SD=0.87) and self-distraction (mean= 2.72, SD=0.67). The identified stressors underscore the need for targeted interventions addressing communication challenges, social development, and acceptance by others. Coping strategy insights provide valuable information for designing support programs tailored to the specific needs of parents. The findings offer practical implications for developing support systems that address the unique challenges faced by these families.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, coping strategies, parental stress, symptoms
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