Heightened Levels of Stress and Contributing Factors in Caregivers of Special Needs Children

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Abstract

Introduction: Caregivers to children with special needs often have to carry out highly demanding care regiments, including making frequent trips to clinics for various therapies, which may cause heightened levels of stress.

Purpose: The purposes of this study were to 1) describe the perceived overall stress of caregivers to special needs children, and 2) explore the predictors contributing to the overall stress.

Methods: A convenience sample of 58 parents with special needs children completed an online survey including questionnaires regarding stress levels (PSS= Perceived Stress Scale), the impact of stress associated with performing home exercise regiments (IES= Impact of Event Scale), and an 11-point self-rated stress scale regarding six different activities carried out by caregivers. Descriptive statistics and stepwise regression were used to analyze data.

Results: Of the 58 responses to the survey, 47 generated valid data, with 34 answering stress questionnaire items. The parents (mean age= 41.8, 86.96% Caucasian, 93.5% female) reported stress above the cut-off point measured by the PSS (M= 19.09, SD= 6.77) and IES (M=21, SD= 17.22). Caregivers ranked activities related to daily time management, the child’s performance of expected social interactions, and the child’s required academic activities as the highest stress inducing activities. Caregivers with characteristics of younger age, lower perceived health status, seeking outside help, and spending more time on weekly clinical treatments explained 68.8% of variance in global stress levels (F(4.21)= 11.57, p<.0001).

Conclusion: Our findings demonstrate that caregivers of special needs children are experiencing high levels of stress. Caregivers’ age, health status, need to seek help, and need to visit clinical therapy sessions are the predictors for stress perception. Those who chose to skip over stress questions may be experiencing even higher levels of stress, but be unwilling to admit it. Further research should be conducted to yield more exact associations between stress and contributing factors, and to ascertain whether clinical or home therapies cause more stress.