

Being a parent takes countless responsibilities and efforts. Child rearing could be one of the most challenging tasks one might experience in his or her life, and raising a child with a disability would enhance the challenge significantly. Although the needs of children with disabilities are frequently addressed in literature as well as media, the needs of such children's parents seem to be overlooked.

The goal of this study was to investigate the types of services used by the parents of children with special needs residing in the state of Michigan and their effectiveness for reducing the parents' stress levels as well as increasing their coping skills. There are four questions on which this research study focuses:

- 1) What are the types of services used by the parents of children with special needs?
- 2) How effective are the services in reducing stress levels of such parents?
- 3) How effective are the services in increasing the coping skills of such parents?
- 4) What are some needs of such parents which may be met by counseling services?

This study involves two separate procedures. For the first procedure, a survey has been used to collect the data. Participants consist of parents and/or caregivers of children with formally diagnosed disabilities who are currently residing in the state of Michigan. The individual participants have been recruited through listservs and contact with disability-specific organizations such as the Learning Disability Association of Michigan. An online survey has been used to collect data regarding the parents' stress levels and experience of receiving services provided for helping such parents.

Following this data collection, those survey participants who indicated such willingness will be contacted for focus groups, exploring the stressors, challenges and supports available for parents in greater depth. This step is still in progress. The investigator will be the facilitator of the group, thus being an observer and an active participant at the same time.

Although the survey is still being conducted, a number of findings from the data gathered thus far were identified. Twenty-seven out of 54 participants (50.0%) responded that they experienced a high degree of stress in the past month, and 16 participants (29.6%) responded that they experienced a very high degree of stress in the past year. 59.3% of the participants (N=32) responded that they had never sought professional services (i.e., therapies) in dealing with their stress of raising a child(ren) with special needs, and the most frequently cited reason (28.1%) for not seeking such services was that they were unable to find services that seemed helpful for their needs.

Among those who have sought professional services in the past, 17 participants responded that they have sought individual counseling, which was identified as the most used type of service. The second most used type of service was support groups, in which 10 participants responded that they had joined in the past or were current members. Among those who had received the counseling service, whether it was individual, couple, family, or any combination of the three, 40% responded that their stress levels were somewhat reduced after receiving such service, and 45% responded that their outlook on raising their child(ren) with special needs became somewhat more optimistic as well. Among those who had received either

group counseling or participated in support groups, or both, 75% responded that their stress levels were somewhat reduced after engaging in such services, and 64% responded that their outlook on raising their child(ren) with special needs became somewhat more optimistic as well. Furthermore, 68.8% responded that they had gained specific knowledge about the child(ren)'s disability/ies from receiving the service(s), and 62% responded that they had gained specific skills for dealing with the child(ren)'s needs.

This data seems to imply that most of the services received by the participants were psychoeducational in nature, although the two most used types of services were identified as individual counseling and support groups. 67% of the participants also responded that they were either very likely or likely to seek an additional service(s) in the future, and the three most selected types of services that such participants would most likely seek were individual counseling (72.2%), support groups (55.6%), and family counseling (38.9%).

The demographic information provided by the participants shows that 52 out of 55 participants (94.5%) identified themselves as female, and 47 out of 51 participants (92.2%) identified themselves as Caucasian/White. Twenty-eight out of 51 participants (54.9%) were aged between 31 and 40, and 42 out of 52 participants (80.8%) were married. Forty-four out of 51 participants (86.3%) had one child with diagnosed disabilities per household, and 22 out of 50 participants (46.8%) reported the severity of his or her disability as moderate.

This work involves both quantitative and qualitative methods, and focuses on both discovery and application. This research is not only intended to gather empirical data, collect descriptive information about personal experiences, and analyze them accordingly, but also to suggest some practical ideas for providing counseling services which would meet the unique needs of each parent based on the research findings.

This study is ongoing, and I hope to gather as much data as possible by the end of this month and collect information about personal experiences through focus groups. After the study is complete, I will write a paper for publication in a professional journal of the field.

If I were to undertake this study again, I would try finding a way to recruit more male participants. I would also try making the categories of services less confusing by providing a definition to technical terminology such as "psychoeducation" and a description of each type of service so that the participants would have a better understanding of that for which the investigator is looking. Gaining resources to be able to access participants who may not have online access or be computer comfortable would also help, through the use of mailings and paper-based surveys.