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SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Objectives

- To address common issues expressed by parents of children with special needs
- To provide an overview of the current study
- To increase the public awareness of the issues and needs of such parents
Common Concerns/Issues Expressed by the Parents
Internal factors

- Blaming themselves as cause of child’s disability
- Feeling shocked, depressed, guilty, confused, angry, hostile and/or desperate at time of diagnosis
- Hopelessness about future of child and family
- Lack of parenting skills
- Lack of coping skills

External factors

- Limited personal time
- Extra medical and treatment expenses
- Not enough information about available resources
- Stereotypes and blame expressed by others
- Lack of trusting relationship with professionals

High levels of stress

(Ergüner-Tekinalp and Akköy, 2004; Gettinger and Guetschow, 1998; Goddard, Lehr, and Lapadat, 2000; Heiman, 2002)
The goal of Study

- To investigate the types of services used by 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.
Research Questions

- What are the types of services used by the parents?
- How effective are the services in reducing stress of the parents?
- How effective are the services in increasing their coping skills?
- What are some needs of such parents which may be met by counseling services?
Mixed Method

- **Survey**
  - Participants recruited through listservs, contact with local organizations, and word of mouth
  - Online, through www.surveymonkey.com
  - Paper, for the Counseling & Speech Therapy Clinic on campus
  - Total of 64 participants

- **Focus group/interview**
  - Recruited among the survey participants
Participant Demographics

- 98.4% (60 out of 61) were female
- 93.3% (56 out of 60) were Caucasian
- 51.7% (31 out of 60) were between age 31 and 40
- 83.6% (51 out of 61) were married
- 88.3% (53 out of 60) had one child with special needs
- 47.7% (26 out of 55) rated the severity of the child’s disability as moderate
Overview of Survey Results
“How would you rate your level of stress?”

Number of responses

- In the last week:
  - Very high: 12.7%
  - High: 34.9%
  - Moderate: 36.5%
- In the last month:
  - Very high: 12.7%
  - High: 49.2%
  - Moderate: 25.4%
- In the last year:
  - Very high: 30.2%
  - High: 34.9%
  - Moderate: 30.2%
What would be the ratio of each factor that might be contributing to your stress level?

Percentage of responses

- Raising a child(ren) with special needs:
  - About 81-100%: 10.2%
  - About 61-80%: 31.7%

- Financial concerns:
  - About 81-100%: 23.7%
  - About 61-80%: 15.9%
“Have you sought professional services in dealing with your stress of raising a child(ren) with special needs?”

Most frequently cited reason for not seeking such services
→ “Unable to find services that seemed helpful for my needs” (25.6%; 10 out of 39)
Most Frequently Used Services

- Individual Counseling: 18 responses
- Support Group: 12 responses
- Family Counseling: 7 responses
- Parenting Training Group: 6 responses
Effectiveness of Services

Stress reduction rate

Percentage of responses

- Counseling:
  - Not Changed At All: 9.1%
  - Greatly Reduced: 22.7%
  - Somewhat Reduced: 45.5%

- Support Group:
  - Not Changed At All: 0.0%
  - Greatly Reduced: 14.3%
  - Somewhat Reduced: 71.4%
Effectiveness of Services

Change in outlook on raising children with special needs

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<th>Percentage of responses</th>
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- Not changed at all
- Greatly more optimistic
- Somewhat more optimistic
“What have you gained from receiving the service(s)?”

- Specific knowledge about the child's disability: 13 responses
- Specific skills for dealing with the child's needs: 12 responses
- Peer support: 8 responses
- Network: 8 responses

(Number of responses)
“How likely are you to seek an additional service(s) in the future?”
“If you were to receive an additional service(s), what would be the most likely format?”

- Individual counseling: 14
- Support group: 11
- Family counseling: 7
- Parenting training group: 6

(Number of responses)
Limitations

- Very few male participants?
- Confusion with some terminology
- Distinction among various services was vague
- Accessibility to Internet
- Limited to Michigan participants
Implications for Counseling Services

- Primary format – group (low-cost, mutual support)
- Sessions divided into two parts: psychoeducation and support group
- Individual or family counseling as a follow-up service
- How they meet should be flexible (face-to-face, home visit, email, by phone etc.)
References


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Hensley, Chiharu, is a Master’s counseling student at Eastern Michigan University. Her research interest in parents of children with special needs has come from her experience of working with individuals with special needs as a board-certified music therapist (MT-BC). Her goal as a professional counselor is to integrate music therapy into counseling.