



Research Article

INFLUENCE OF AGE AND GENDER OF THE AUTISTIC CHILDREN ON THEIR PARENT'S LIFE SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to assess the influence of age and gender of the autistic children on their parents' life satisfaction. The study was conducted on a total sample of 190 parents of children with autism aged 5 to 10 years old from various special schools in Bangalore city. The data was collected using the self-structured Life Satisfaction Scale through purposive sampling technique. 'f'-test and 't'-test were used to analyse the data for the study. The finding of the study revealed that parents of children with autism have low life satisfaction. Further, the data also showed that there were a highly significance difference between age of the autistic children and their parent's life satisfaction. And, gender of the child did not influence the parent's life satisfaction. Thus, the study highlights the need for educating the parents of children with autism on how to handle their children's maladaptive behaviours and techniques of teaching the daily living activities to their autistic children. By doing so, children with autism will be able to perform some of the simple task by themselves with minimum support in their later life. Moreover, parents will also be able to take their personal time.

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INTRODUCTION

Autism is known as a complex developmental disability. It manifests itself during the first three years of a person's life. This is the condition of a neurological disorder that has an effect on the child's normal brain function, affecting development of his/her communication and social interaction skills (Medical News Today, 2016). Children with autism have repetitive and restricted behaviours such as hand-flapping, rocking, lining up toys, or finding the whirling blades of a fan, etc. (Kim, & Lord, 2010; Militermi, Bravaccio, Falco, Fico, & Palermo, 2002; Network, 2008). Autistic children are very sensitive to sensory experiences. They might be easily upset by certain sounds, or eat only foods with a certain texture (Raising Children Network, 2016). According to The Hans India (2017), 1 in 68 children are found to be on the Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in India and around 70 million people are affected by autism around the world. It is one of the fastest growing developmental disability all over the world including India. According to Cho, and Kahng, (2014) autistic children need assistance in performing the tasks or day's activities such as bathing, tooth-brushing, dressing, and taking a meal, purchasing, doing household chores, laundry, taking medicine, managing money, etc.

Under these circumstances, parents play an important role in taking care of their children in every activities of daily life. Parents as a primary caregivers deal with the issues associated with their child's disability as well as maintain the household chores (Ravindranadan, & Raju, 2008); and other responsibilities. They have less time for themselves as individuals such as getting enough sleep, eating regular meals, taking a short walk, and doing things that they really enjoy (Ravindranadan *et al.*, 2008); as well as for other family members including their normal children and their spouse since the child requires more support and extra amount of time for caring from the parent (Brobst, Clopton, & Hendrick, 2009; Lovisotto, Caltabiano, & Hajhashemi, 2015).

Raising a child with autism is not only challenging but also very stressful for parent as it impedes their day to day routines, financial constraints, lack of socialization, health issues, etc. All of these can influence the parents' life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is defined as an individual's judgment of how satisfied they are with their present state of affairs based on a comparison with criteria which each individual sets for him or herself (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). A sense of low quality of life among parents of children with autism lead to various problems in their lives such as anxiety, introversion, social withdrawal, a sense of loneliness, loss of the meaning of life, the lack of efficiency in social relations, negative social behaviour, emotional unbalance, failure to form and maintain

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friendships, etc. (Asi, 2016). Therefore, the present study was taken up with the following objectives.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

1. The first objective was to assess the influence of age of the autistic children on the life satisfaction of the parents
2. The second objective was to assess the influence of gender of the autistic children on the life satisfaction of the parents.

Sample

One-ninety parents of children with autism (ages 5 to 10 years old) from various special schools and organisations in Bangalore city were considered as sample of the study.

Tool used

The data for the study was collected using the self-structured five point Likert type rating scale of ‘Life Satisfaction’ through purposive sampling technique to assess the life satisfaction of parents of autistic children. The tool consisted of a total of 36 items. The items of the tool were categorized under the following seven dimensions for the sake of analysis:

1. Life satisfaction related to parent’s own life
2. Life satisfaction related to their autistic child
3. Comparison with parents of normal and disabled children
4. Family life and life satisfaction
5. Time spent with family members and friends
6. Life satisfaction related to support and development to them
7. Life satisfaction related to problem faced by them

From the 36 items, 13 were positive statements and the remaining 23 were negative. The items were answered using a five response options “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree” and “strongly agree”. Positive items such as “I am satisfied with my life” were given a score of 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5; whereas, negative items such as “I did not get what I wanted in life” were reverse scored i.e. 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1.

METHOD

The investigator visited various special schools in the Bangalore city. The consent letter was submitted to the school authorities. Permission was sought from the principal to conduct the study in their esteemed schools. Further, the investigator met the parents of children who are diagnosed with autism and explained to them about the purpose of the study. The parents were given assurance that the information obtained from them will be kept confidential and used only for the research purpose. The data for the present study was collected by using a self-structured life satisfaction scale from the parents of children with autism who were willing to give their responses to the statements given in the scale. Further, the data obtained from them was scored, analysed and tabulated using ‘f-test’ and ‘t-test’. Findings of the study are interpreted under result and discussion:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The socio-demographic information for parents consisted of age, educational qualification, occupation, household monthly

income, type of family, family size and religion. Parent-reported basic information for their autistic child which consisted of the child’s age, date of birth, gender of the child, ordinal position of the child and name of the school. Most of the children (41%) were from the age group of 7 to 8 years old, 30% of them were from the age group of 9 to 10 years and the remaining 29 % were 5 to 6 years old. Eighty-seven percent of the autistic child were male and only sixteen percent were female child. Werling and Geschwind (2013) showed that autism affects females less frequently than males. 85% of the autistic children were first born, 14% of them were second born and only few children (1%) were third born. The majority of the respondents (87%) were from nuclear type of family and the remaining (13%) were from joint family. The mean levels of parent’s life satisfaction according to their child’s age are given in table 1.

Table 1 Mean levels of parents’ life satisfaction according to their child’s age

Dimensions of Parents’ life satisfaction	Age of the child (in years) (Mean ±SD)			Significance of F value
	5 to 6 (n=55)	7 to 8 (n= 78)	9 to 10 (n = 57)	
Related to their life	6.83 ± 2.37	7.85 ± 2.10	8.87 ± 2.61	10.6177**
Related to Children with Autism	7.34 ± 1.92	8.42 ± 2.08	9.54 ± 5.13	12.1802**
Comparison with parents of Normal children & Disabled children	5.05 ± 1.35	5.80 ± 1.25	6.15 ± 1.47	9.7601**
Family life & Life Satisfaction	8.90 ± 2.35	9.58 ± 2.29	10.43 ± 3.01	5.0834**
Time spent with Family Members & Friends	8.78 ± 2.36	9.36 ± 2.25	10.49 ± 2.86	6.9686**
Related to support and development	9.56 ± 2.67	9.56 ± 2.21	10.75 ± 2.50	4.7755**
Related to problem faced by them	9.78 ± 2.34	10.63 ± 2.02	11.40 ± 2.24	7.7031**

** Significant at 1% level

Table 1 reveals that there was highly significance difference between age of the child and all the dimensions of life satisfaction of the parents. The table also shows that the life satisfaction of parents in all dimensions is better in the case of their children who are in the age group of nine to ten years old. It means that as the age of the child increases, the parent’s life satisfaction also gradually improve with practice. Psychological well-being among parents of children with autism becomes higher as children grew up (Yong, Hwang, Ko, & Kim, 2009). On the whole, parents of children with autism have low life satisfaction. Some of the researchers also found that parents of autistic children experienced low life satisfaction (Cho *et al.*, 20014; Lu, Yang, Skora, Wang, Cai, Sun, & Li, 2015), and tend to have high levels of stress within the family unit, depression, worse physical health, psycho-emotional low resistance, and more guilt (Grey, 1994; Patterson, 2002). Lovisotto *et al.*, (2015) reported that when a child is diagnosed with autism, parents have to change their roles, family routines and rules within the family structures to accommodate the ongoing needs of their autistic child. Ultimately it leads to a family breakdown also affects the couple’s marital satisfaction (Patterson, 2002). They even irrationally blame themselves for causing their child’s condition (Fernandez and Arcia 2004). However, as time passes they tend to accept their child’s disability and they are often reported to seek emotional support from other parents in similar situations to gain a shared worldview (Patterson, 2002). They strived to improve their knowledge about their child’s

disorder by reading books, conversing with other parents, and surfing the Internet to obtain information (Hall, & Graff, 2010; Koydemir-Ozden, & Tosun, 2010; Lin, Tsai, & Chang, 2008; Meirsschaut, Roeyers, & Warreyn, 2010; Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008). So, later in life, with the increase of their child's age, parents' knowledge, awareness, experience and strategies in handling their child with autism improves and leads to reduce stress experienced by them and increase their life satisfaction. In addition, the stress of having a child with ASD can negatively influence the couple relationship (Meadan, Halle, & Ebata, 2010).

Table 2 Mean levels of parents' life satisfaction according to their child's gender

Dimensions of Parents' life satisfaction	Gender of the child (Mean ±SD)		Significance of t value
	Male (n = 160)	Female (n= 30)	
Related to their life	7.78 ± 2.47	8.10 ± 2.15	0.6454 ^{NS}
Related to Children with Autism	8.43 ± 2.52	8.36 ± 2.15	0.1438 ^{NS}
Comparison with parents of Normal children & Disabled children	5.72 ± 1.40	5.57 ± 1.37	0.5663 ^{NS}
Family life & Life Satisfaction	9.65 ± 2.65	9.54 ± 2.23	0.2256 ^{NS}
Time spent with Family Members & Friends	9.60 ± 2.62	9.2 ± 2.20	0.7843 ^{NS}
Related to support and development	10.01 ± 2.50	9.46 ± 2.43	1.0990 ^{NS}
Related to problem faced by them	10.63 ± 2.34	10.46 ± 1.73	0.3651 ^{NS}

NS Not significant

Table 2 presents the mean levels of parents' life satisfaction according to their child's gender. According to this table there was no significant difference in the life satisfaction of the parents of autistic girls and boys. This may be because the age group considered in the present study is five to ten years. During this age group, parents need to provide the same care, treatment, therapy, etc. irrespective of the child's gender. Some researchers reported that the differences in symptoms in males and females are not apparent in toddlerhood (Halladay, *et al.*, 2015), they do not show any differences in their behavioural features, suggesting that the differences in symptoms do not show up until later in development (Postorino, *et al.*, 2015; Reinhardt, Wetherby, Schatschneider, & Lord, 2015).

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that parenting a child with autism is challenging for every parents. Children with autism often require extra parental attention. Parents must take an effort to learn the techniques of teaching their child the basic functional skills that are required for everyday living including brushing, toileting, bathing, eating, grooming, doing household chores, using money etc. and also they must learn how to handle and manage their child's behaviours. When parents learn how to teach these skills and handle their autistic child tactfully they will see changes and improvement in their life. Then eventually their ability to deal with their children with autism will also be increased, which emphasizes that the quality of life cannot be achieved for individuals with disabilities without achieving it among their parents.

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