

Parenting Children with Disabilities: Effects on the Marital Relationship

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Abstract

This literature review examines the complex challenges faced by heterosexual families raising children with disabilities, focusing on emotional, financial, and social impacts. It explores parents' experiences of stress, anxiety, and depression; additionally, highlighting gender differences in caregiving roles, where mothers often bear a disproportionate burden while fathers may feel isolated. The literature review also considers the effects on siblings, who may experience feelings of neglect and emotional distress while also investigating societal issues such as stigma, discrimination, and limited access to resources. Also explored is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families of children with disabilities. The findings emphasize the role and importance of counselling psychology. Considering tailored interventions, such as cognitive behavioural therapy and family counselling, to support parental mental health, foster resilience, and promote positive family dynamics. This literature review advocates for comprehensive support systems comprised of financial assistance, accessible services, and inclusive policies, to empower families and create a more equitable environment for individuals with disabilities.

Keywords: family dynamics, disabilities, caregiver burden, counselling psychology, support systems

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Parenting Children with Disabilities: Effects on the Marital Relationship

In Canada, 27% of individuals aged 15 years and older, or 8.0 million people, report one or more disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2023), and this rate of disability has increased by 5% since 2017. Another report by Charters et al. (2022, as cited in Statistics Canada, 2022), suggested that in 2021, 16.3% of children, aged 0 to 14 years were identified to have some kind of disability. Xia et al. 2023 indicated that the number of children with disabilities is increasing tremendously and is a growing global health priority. Globally, the research findings reported that around 95 million children aged 0-14 live with some form of disability (Xia et al., 2023). Therefore, it becomes critical to understand the needs of children with disabilities and their families.

Raising a child with disabilities presents a multifaceted landscape of challenges. There can be many kinds of disabilities. Individuals with disabilities is a broad term that defines any impairment, including a long-term physical, intellectual, or sensory impairment which, in interaction with environmental and personal factors, may prevent them from full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Mailhot Amborski et al., 2022). There are different terms used in literature for children with disabilities, but this literature review will use the same term; children with disabilities throughout the paper to keep it clear and succinct for the readers. Furthermore, this review refers to children with lifelong disabilities, who have limited ability to care for themselves (Sapiets et al., 2021). Due to these limitations, children with disabilities are sometimes dependent on their support persons for most of their necessities depending on the nature of disability (Lee et al., 2020). Besides their dependence on caregivers, children with disabilities also demand more time and energy from their parents.

Caring for a child with disabilities can largely impact the functioning of the family and their relationships. The higher the degree of the child's disability, the higher the impact on parents, as they experience more stress, and difficulty fulfilling their parenting roles (Kijak, 2020). In addition to immediate care, there is also financial strain, emotional stress, social isolation, and disrupted family dynamics that the parents of children with disabilities struggle with. Therefore, this literature review aims to answer the research question: What is the effect of having children with disabilities on the marital relationship of the parents?

Parents of children with disabilities may face several challenges; this paper focuses on the marital relationship of heterosexual parents and the ways their relationship may be impacted due to having children with disabilities. As defined, the marital relationship can refer to the bond between two people with different personalities (Sayehmiri et al., 2020), that are legally recognized in any jurisdiction. There are different terms used in the literature for marital relationships, such as family relationship, kinship, and marriage, but this literature review will use the term marital relationship throughout the paper for clarity purposes.

Abreu-Afonso et al.'s (2021) research suggested that spouses are happier and live longer in healthy marriages. Their marriage may be impacted due to the significant changes that a family undergoes over time. The researchers noted that these changes, including attachment, conflict, or children, are important factors as they may impact marital satisfaction. Therefore, this literature review will explore the quality of life of parents, its impact on them individually, and their joint marital relationship. It will also highlight the unique challenges and common stressors faced by parents of children with disabilities, including social isolation and stigma, career and education challenges, mental health concerns, and resiliency.

Caring for children with disabilities presents numerous challenges for parents. Parents may feel burdened with the lifelong need to care for their children with disabilities (Ismail et al., 2021). Ismail et al. also noted that the upbringing demands of children with disabilities may require a considerable amount of time, physical energy, emotional strength, and financial support from parents. It can be a traumatic event for the whole family due to the added responsibilities that they were not expecting with the birth of their child (Xia et al., 2023). Parents of children with disabilities may experience feelings of guilt, concern, sadness, and frustration. Children with disabilities can be more prone to maltreatment by other family members than those without disabilities (Yanagisawa et al., 2022), which makes it more difficult for parents to manage. Compared to families having children without disabilities, parents may experience higher debt, reduced savings, and difficulty affording necessities (Hounsell et al., 2021). Additionally, parents may grieve for a “typical” childhood that their child may not have (Syed et al., 2020). Most parents of children with disabilities are not just physically affected, but also emotionally, mentally, and financially.

Parents of children with disabilities often experience high stress levels. They are likely associated with an increase in physical and mental distress when compared to parents of children without any disabilities (Lee et al., 2020). Increased level of stress affects their health, relationships, and interactions (Ishtiaq et al., 2020). These common stressors can affect family functioning and the mental health of the families (Lee et al., 2020). Mousavi (2020) brought attention to the World Health Organization’s definition of mental health as the absence of mental disorders enabling a person to grow and experience overall well-being. While recognizing the impact of care on mental health, it is important to note that the uncertainty surrounding a child’s future and well-being may fuel anxiety, making it difficult for parents to find peace of mind. This

worry can manifest physically and emotionally, leading to feelings of helplessness, sadness, and even depression (Jafree & Burhan, 2020). This may lead to negative responses and feelings in parents. For example, some parents may feel shame about their child's diagnosis, and avoid seeking help for their child (Lee et al., 2020), which can affect their quality of life (Xia et al., 2023). The nature of the child's disabilities, the emotional status of the parents, and the lack of financial resources and social support may cause increasing stress among parents (Syed et al., 2020). Parents may feel misunderstood and unsupported, struggling to find connection with others facing similar challenges (Hsu et al., 2021), resulting in social isolation. Although children with disabilities may struggle in their lives, their parents also struggle in different areas due to the increased and unexpected responsibilities associated with their children.

Raising children with disabilities may demand many sacrifices and compromises from the parents of these children. It can be hard for them to take care of themselves or other members of the family due to the demands of the treatments and care of their child with disabilities (Syed et al., 2020). Many times, the parents feel pressured due to the constant efforts required to support their children which can lead to psychological pathologies like shame, remorse, excessive load, bitterness, lack of social networking, and lack of control both internally and externally (Syed et al., 2020). Parents of children with disabilities can become restricted; as a result, parents may lack personal time and freedom to pursue their professional careers (Xia et al., 2023). Limited ability to pursue education and professional careers may exacerbate financial strain. Sometimes, parents struggle financially due to the additional costs of caring for their children and providing them with special education (Kim et al., 2023). Furthermore, limited access to specialists, long wait times, and inadequate healthcare infrastructure can create barriers

to optimal care (Yanagisawa et al., 2022). Accessing appropriate resources and advocating for a child's needs can be frustrating and time-consuming, making it hard for the parents.

Societal structures, both physical and psychological, may contribute to further challenges for parents, in addition to their ongoing struggle to accommodate the child's needs. Parental perceptions and experiences of raising a child with disabilities are diverse due to different religious beliefs, acculturation, and other individual characteristics, including age, education, and income level (Hsu et al., 2023). Anecdotal evidence has suggested that parents living in culturally rooted societies experience stigma and lack of social support. These affiliated stigmas often affect the well-being of the parents and increase their negative emotions (Ng et al., 2021). Parents can be restricted by culture and religious beliefs in many places to bring forward their children with disabilities and introduce them into society.

Despite the challenges, parents can demonstrate remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. Building coping mechanisms, such as seeking support groups, practicing self-care, and focusing on their child's strengths, helps them navigate difficult situations (Arif et al., 2021). Strong social support systems are crucial for parents' physical and emotional growth (Ishtiaq et al., 2020). This support can come from family, friends, and professionals and can contribute to the parents' mental well-being.

Parents may go through a whole life transition with the birth of a child with disabilities. Life can become complicated for them as they face these challenges, impacting them mentally, physically, emotionally, and financially. Parents often struggle in their marital relationships due to increased responsibilities and stress in their lives. Many families struggle with negative responses from the society. Thus, it is important that they feel supported by their family, friends, or other communities. This support can help provide them with a sense of comfort and ease in

their difficult time. This literature review seeks to enhance awareness and understanding of the often overlooked and under-supported experiences of parents raising a child with disabilities. It provides a comprehensive exploration of the challenges that the parents of children with disabilities face, which have received limited attention in research and practice.

Methodology

In the process of writing this research paper, I searched multiple databases including Education Source, Psychology and Behavioural Collection, Mental Health and Social Care Collection for the period between October 16, 2023, and July 20, 2024. Search terms were tailored to each database, and I compiled the articles as advised by my supervisor. I used a variety of keywords in the database to search the literature relevant to my topic. I used the keywords including children with disabilities, children with special needs, effect on parents' challenges for marital relationships, family functioning, intellectual disabilities, white families, and South-Asian culture. Initially in my search, I started with the three search terms: 'children with disabilities,' 'marital relationship,' and 'Asian population.' Then I realized that if I removed the term 'Asian population,' and only used the other two terms, it provided a good number of articles. Therefore, I focused on the children with disabilities and their effect rather than on a certain population. The Appendix includes the five most important articles that I have cited in my paper to discuss the impact of children with disabilities on the marital relationship of their parents. As stated previously, the research question I address in this capstone is: What is the effect of having children with disabilities on the marital relationship of the parents?

Self-Positioning Statement

I am an Indian immigrant currently residing in Canada, embarking on a scholarly journey to explore the profound and often overlooked effects of having children with disabilities on the

marital relationship of parents. This literature review represents a synthesis of my background, cultural context, professional experiences, and scholarly aspirations.

Growing up in India, I was immersed in a culture where people with disabilities or mental health issues were viewed as stigma and shame. Families struggling with the challenges of raising children with disabilities often face societal judgment. The prevailing attitude towards such children was one of misunderstanding, with derogatory labels and exclusionary behaviour perpetuating their marginalization. This cultural backdrop instilled in me a deep sense of empathy and a commitment to challenging societal norms that perpetuate discrimination and prejudice.

My path to exploring the dynamics of children with disabilities within marital relationships was influenced by a convergence of familial expectations and personal aspirations. Raised in what I would call a typical Indian family, my father, coming from a business background, envisioned a future where I would pursue psychology and migrate to Canada for its abundant opportunities. His belief in the transformative power of psychology to alleviate human suffering, particularly within the realm of interpersonal relationships, ignited my passion for understanding and addressing the complexities of family dynamics.

For the past seven years, I have been immersed in the field of special education, serving as a behaviour support worker within the Canadian school system. In this capacity, I have had the privilege of working closely with children grappling with a variety of behavioural and physical challenges, including autism, ADHD, and learning disabilities. My role has been to provide tailored interventions and support strategies to facilitate their academic and social-emotional development. Through this hands-on experience, I have gained invaluable insights

into the daily struggles faced by families raising children with disabilities, as well as the ripple effects on marital harmony and familial well-being.

The decision to delve into the effects of children with disabilities on marital relationships stems from a deep-seated conviction that these issues warrant scholarly attention and compassionate inquiry. By shedding light on this under-explored topic, I hope to challenge stereotypes, foster empathy, and encourage meaningful change within both academic and societal realms. I aim to amplify the voices of families navigating this complex issue while advocating for greater awareness, support, and inclusivity.

By examining the effects of children with disabilities on the marital relationship of parents, I aim to contribute to a better understanding of family dynamics, promote empathy and inclusivity, and advocate for meaningful change. Through rigorous inquiry and ethical engagement, I aspire to make a meaningful and enduring impact on the lives of families grappling with the challenges of raising these children. In aiming for ethical engagement, I will be aware of any possible biases in the research. It is crucial to avoid bias before, during, and after the research to prevent any false conclusions.

Bias in research refers to a systematic error or deviation from the truth in the results or inferences of a study. It can occur at any stage of the research process, including study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and publication. Bias can arise from various sources, such as the researcher's perspectives, assumptions, preferences, funding sources, or unintentional errors in methodology (Eastman & Rix, 2022). Addressing and minimizing bias is crucial for ensuring the validity and reliability of research findings.

Confirmation bias, a cognitive tendency to favor information aligning with pre-existing beliefs while disregarding contradictory evidence, poses a significant challenge to objective

analysis (Dibbets & Meesters, 2020). As I delve into my scholarly journey, I am acutely aware of the potential for confirmation bias to influence my research despite not directly involving participants. This bias may subtly impact the selection and interpretation of literature and data. To counteract its influence, I maintain a vigilant and critical mindset, actively seeking diverse perspectives, theories, and empirical evidence. By embracing alternative viewpoints and considering contradictory evidence, I strive to ensure the integrity and objectivity of my analysis. My personal experiences in this field inform my approach, driving me to remain mindful of the potential influence of my own biases on data interpretation. Actively seeking out contradictory evidence and considering alternative viewpoints are crucial steps in mitigating confirmation bias and fostering rigorous and balanced research.

Cultural bias, which stems from interpreting information through one's cultural lens (Lacko et al., 2022), could potentially distort understanding across diverse cultural contexts in my research. As an individual with my cultural background and worldview, I will acknowledge its potential influence on my research endeavours. While participants will not be directly involved, I recognize that my personal experiences may shape interpretations and conclusions. To mitigate this bias, I will critically examine the framing of research questions, interpret findings with cultural sensitivity, and refrain from imposing my cultural values in my own favour. Reflecting on how my cultural perspective might impact the research process, I will actively seek literature from diverse contexts, engaging in reflexivity to mitigate biases. By considering various cultural perspectives, I will strive for inclusive and relevant research outcomes.

Although participants are not recruited for this paper, there is still a risk of selection bias in the literature and data I chose to include. To address this bias, I will conduct a comprehensive

and systematic review of the existing literature, ensuring that I consider a wide range of sources and viewpoints. By actively seeking out diverse perspectives and avoiding over-reliance on sources that align with my views, I aim to minimize the influence of selection bias and enhance the validity of my analysis.

Despite rigorous data evaluation and reporting, social desirability bias can still influence how information is represented in literature. This bias occurs when individuals choose socially acceptable responses over truthful ones, compromising the integrity of survey and interview data (Culpepper, 2022). To mitigate this bias, I will critically evaluate how social norms and expectations may shape the presentation of research findings. By remaining vigilant for signs of potential bias and adopting a balanced and objective approach to synthesizing information, I aim to ensure the integrity and accuracy of my analysis.

Publication bias occurs when studies showing statistically significant results are more likely to be published than those with non-significant or negative findings, causing a threat to the scientific literature (Olsson & Sundell, 2023). To address this bias, I will critically evaluate the quality and representativeness of the literature, considering both published and unpublished sources to the greatest extent possible. By actively seeking out diverse sources of information and acknowledging the potential limitations of the existing literature, I aim to minimize the impact of publication bias on my research findings.

I aim to uphold the highest standards of integrity and transparency. It is my priority to ensure that all citations and credits are meticulously mentioned, leaving no room for oversight or omission. By meticulously acknowledging the contributions of others, I will strive to maintain academic and ethical standards. Furthermore, I am dedicated to avoiding conflicts of interest and

recognizing the importance of impartiality in all my endeavours. By maintaining a clear and unbiased perspective, I aim to cultivate trust and credibility in my work.

In conclusion, by adhering to rigorous ethical standards and actively addressing potential biases, I strive to produce research that is credible, valid, and trustworthy. Through transparent reporting, peer debriefing, and reflexivity, I aim to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of raising children with disabilities within marital relationships, ultimately promoting empathy, inclusivity, and informed decision-making in this critical area.

Literature Review

Impact of Care on Marital Satisfaction

While caring for a child with disabilities can bring immense joy, it also presents multiple challenges for some couples. These challenges can strongly impact marital satisfaction among couples (Mousavi, 2020). Spouse caregivers often experience the most significant burden than other informal caregivers (Liao et al., 2022). The challenging events in the family context can be hard to manage as they change the dynamics of the family functioning (Mousavi, 2020). Parents' lives are filled with strong emotions and hard choices after discovering that their child has disabilities (Abadiano & Englis, 2022). These stressful events can lead to stress and act as a threat to marital satisfaction and intimate relationships (Mousavi, 2020). Most often, Mousavi observed, this provides the couple with fewer opportunities to spend time with each other which can negatively impact their level of intimacy. Research has found that parents of children with intellectual disabilities are dissatisfied with their relationships and report greater parenting burden and stress (Brown et al., 2020). The marital relationship is often interrupted due to the constant struggle of the couple and their added responsibilities, including supporting children with disabilities.

Though both men and women can be impacted due to the lack of satisfaction in their marriage, there is a gender difference in their respective understanding of marital satisfaction. Researchers have suggested that men and women can have different expectations in marital relationships; men may prioritize sexual relationships and physical intimacy, and women may prioritize other things, including love and warmth, over sexual satisfaction (Mousavi, 2020). Researchers found that spousal support is crucial for many women as they may feel isolated in their journey of parenthood, raising children with disabilities (Rakap et al., 2023). Some women have reported finding satisfaction in their partners supporting them with household responsibilities and raising their children together (Mousavi, 2020). Furthermore, Chan et al. (2018, as cited in Ng et al., 2021) reported that the parents of children with ASD often experience negative emotions and behaviours, which may worsen their interactions causing conflict between the couple. Both mothers and fathers may have different expectations from their marital relationships; therefore, that may cause disappointment and frustration when their respective needs are not fulfilled, which can further cause problems in their relationships.

Marital relationships are likely to experience conflict at some point during the partnership. Stress and exhaustion can worsen these pre-existing differences, promoting arguments and dissatisfaction (Lui et al., 2020). Focusing on the child's needs can create a barrier for the couple, further straining the relationship (Mousavi, 2020). Researchers observed that negative communication patterns may turn up, eroding trust in the spousal relationship (Lui et al., 2020). Parents are at a higher risk of divorce when their children have emotional disturbances (Kim et al., 2023). Therefore, the care of children with disabilities strongly impacts the spousal relationship and marital satisfaction of the couple.

The child's needs often demand a significant shift in traditional roles, with one partner taking on the primary caregiver role and potentially sacrificing personal time and career goals while the other becomes the breadwinner. This imbalance can lead to feelings of unfairness, resentment, and lost identity (Lui et al., 2020). Many mothers experience higher depressive symptoms, parenting stress, and dissatisfaction in life than caregivers of typically developing children (Hsu et al., 2023). As indicated above, although both parents of children with disabilities can experience hardships, the mothers may struggle more than the fathers due to the unequal distribution of responsibilities in the family.

The type of disability may significantly impact parental sexual satisfaction, with parents of children with autism reporting lower overall satisfaction compared to those with intellectual disabilities. A study by Kijak (2020) delved into the complexities of sexual satisfaction among parents caring for children with intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). While parents generally reported average levels of satisfaction in both sexual fulfillment and marital relationships, there were notable differences. A satisfying sex life plays an essential role in a relationship as it can strengthen the bonds between partners and can positively affect the level of satisfaction within the relationship. Kijak noted that it may also help increase the overall quality of an individual's life. While sexual satisfaction carries value in marital relationships, it may be impacted by having children with disabilities.

Additionally, larger families, especially those with multiple children, may experience increased frustration due to the added responsibilities on the parents, giving them less time to spend with each other. This can result in poorer family functioning and decreased quality of life (Langley et al., 2021). These findings emphasized the need to include discussions on sexual and

marital satisfaction in therapy and counselling sessions for families having children with disabilities, advocating for open communication between partners.

Despite these challenges, many couples can emerge stronger by focusing on open communication, seeking professional support, and prioritizing their relationship (Brown et al., 2020). Open and honest communication can be valuable for navigating challenges and promoting understanding (Mousavi, 2020). Seeking professional help from therapists or counsellors can equip couples with tools and strategies to manage stress, improve communication, and strengthen their relationships (Brown et al., 2020). By acknowledging the challenges and actively working to strengthen their bond, couples caring for a child with disabilities can build a supportive and fulfilling relationship.

The impact on marital satisfaction is particularly noteworthy, as the constant demands and stress can lead to emotional disconnection and misunderstandings between partners. The traditional gender roles often exacerbate these issues, with mothers typically taking on primary caregiving responsibilities and fathers assuming the role of financial providers, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction and lost identity. However, research suggests that with open communication and professional support, couples can navigate these challenges and potentially strengthen their relationships. The unique experience of parents of children with disabilities is under-researched yet remains an important part of inclusive counselling psychology.

Impact on Family Dynamics

Children with disabilities may significantly impact family dynamics, influencing both parents and siblings. Caring for children with disabilities can have a significant emotional toll on the parents. Family members belong to multiple interrelated subsystems, such as spousal and

parental subsystems, and play multiple roles within them (Lui et al., 2020). Therefore, relationships within one subsystem often affect the other subsystems in the family.

Caring for a child with disabilities can affect the functioning of the family and their relationships. It can raise tension in relationships with partners, siblings, and extended family (Lanjekar et al., 2022). Lanjekar et al. observed that differing coping mechanisms, communication challenges, and the emotional toll can lead to tension and conflict. Limited time and energy can also strain relationships with siblings who may feel neglected or resentful.

Having a child with disabilities in the family may demand compromises not only from the parents of the children but also from their siblings and other extended family members. It may become hard for them to spend quality time with each other, which may cause more tension and conflict between family members. Parents and siblings of children with disabilities may struggle to maintain a positive environment in their house due to their increased stress level, which impacts the family as a whole.

Parental Experiences

Parents of children with disabilities may struggle in their marital relationship due to the added responsibilities on them but can also experience conflicts with other family members. A study by Langley et al. (2021) explored family functioning in households of children with disabilities, emphasizing the crucial role of the marital relationship. Their findings, using the instrument called Family APGAR (Adaptability, Partnership, Growth, Affection, and Resolve) scale, revealed four key factors influencing mothers' perceptions: satisfaction with partner relationships, warmth between siblings, disagreements with partners, and conflict with children. Strong partner relationships significantly contributed to positive family functioning, highlighting the critical impact of a supportive marital dynamic on the entire family unit. Issues in one

relationship, for example, parent-child conflict, negatively impacted the whole family, while positive sibling connections fostered a supportive environment. Therefore, Langley et al. identified interconnectedness within family subsystems (marital, parental, sibling). One disturbed relationship in the family may directly or indirectly impact the other relationships within the family. Parents often experience high levels of stress and burden due to the responsibilities of raising a child with disabilities. Parental stress may prevent both mothers and fathers from investing in high-quality co-parenting relationships (Downes & Cappe, 2021). For example, research suggested that parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder reported lower levels of marital happiness, family cohesion, and family adaptability as compared to parents of children without disabilities (Brown et al., 2020). Therefore, a healthy relationship between the parents may positively impact the functioning of the entire family.

Raising a child with disabilities can be exhausting. Parents who are involved in the care of children with complex difficulties reported difficulties finding time for their minds to relax (Collins et al., 2020; Currie & Szabo, 2020; Krantz et al., 2022; Schiller et al., 2024). Research suggested a significant gap in understanding the ways of providing the right support to the parents of children with disabilities. In some countries, parents of children with disabilities receive medical, financial, and other support to help them with the challenges, but this financial support is mostly for the child's care and not sufficient for the family use (Novak-Pavlic et al., 2023). Therefore, the lack of enough support results in high stress among the parents. This underlines the importance of considering various family dynamics and their interrelatedness when supporting families raising children with disabilities.

Impact on Siblings

Siblings of children with disabilities may experience a complex range of emotions and challenges (Avieli et al., 2019). Witnessing their sibling's struggles can foster empathy, responsibility, and even maturity. Some siblings may experience feelings of jealousy from the children with disabilities. They may present challenges as they discover the diagnosis of their sibling. The severity of these emotions can depend on various factors like age, personality, family dynamics, and the nature of the disability.

Having a child with disabilities in the family greatly impacts the child's siblings. It may take them some time to adapt themselves to the family dynamics which are different from the family dynamics raising children without disabilities. Sometimes, they struggle with negative feelings of shame, neglect, and resentment at their sibling's diagnosis. Though it may be difficult for them to accept their sibling with mental health challenges initially, they can be quite helpful for their siblings as well.

The relationship between siblings and children with disabilities can be both supportive and stressful. Caliendo et al.'s (2020) review of more than 50 studies revealed that growing up with a sibling with a disability has both positive and negative effects. The negative effects are often immediate, but the positive effects are later, in adolescence or in adulthood. The research cited by Caliendo et al. found that most siblings cope well and offer companionship, understanding, and practical help, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance to their siblings with disabilities. However, some siblings are at risk of developing severe adaptation difficulties including decreased self-esteem and social stigma. According to Frankel et al. (2022), research has found that sometimes siblings attempt to conceal their needs and emotions, so they do not

burden their parents any further. Additionally, guilt and resentment can arise due to perceived responsibility for the children with disabilities or the burden placed upon them.

Therefore, siblings' reactions to a child with disabilities can vary depending on their maturity level, family environment, and their age group. Some siblings are quite supportive of the children with disabilities and support them throughout their lives. However, it may be difficult for some of them to adapt to the different family dynamics. The child with disabilities may demand the majority of their parents' attention which can make the other children feel neglected. These negative life events within the family, including parental stress, social isolation, neglect, and loss are predictors of internalizing disorders in the siblings of children with disabilities (Hanvey et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to prioritize their emotional needs. Research suggested that adult siblings of people with developmental disabilities show higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of satisfaction, and closeness, and worries (Caliendo et al., 2020). Recognizing the complexities in sibling relationships and offering appropriate support can help face the challenges and foster the establishment of resilient, constructive bonds. Analysing both the parental experiences and effects on siblings, a comprehensive understanding of family dynamics within the households of children with disabilities is attained. It also serves as a cornerstone for the formulation of efficacious interventions aimed at promoting the well-being of all members within the family unit.

Siblings of children with disabilities may experience a unique set of challenges and opportunities. While they often develop empathy and maturity, they may also feel overlooked and experience jealousy and academic challenges. The sibling relationship can be supportive yet stressful, with the need for careful navigation to foster positive bonds. Parental support and understanding of these dynamics are crucial for the well-being of all family members. The

societal challenges and stigma associated with raising a child with disabilities can further complicate the experience (Alshaigi et al., 2020). Negative attitudes and cultural beliefs can lead to discrimination and limited access to opportunities, with socioeconomic factors playing a significant role in the availability of resources. Despite these challenges, parents exhibit remarkable resilience and resourcefulness.

Impact of Gender Indifference and Societal Norms

Raising a child with disabilities may present distinct challenges and opportunities for mothers and fathers due to societal expectations and gender roles. Mothers often experience higher stress, anxiety, and depression (Miniarikova et al., 2022), possibly due to societal pressure for primary caregiving, idealized motherhood roles, and isolation (Benatov et al., 2022). In contrast, fathers may feel less emotionally connected due to less hands-on caregiving, leading to isolation and inadequacy (Kim et al., 2023). Langley et al. (2021) noted that no notable difference was found between the family functioning of fathers with and without a child with disabilities. Some fathers may be less impacted than the mothers, due to the mothers' greater involvement in the child's daily care. Langley et al. observed that less involvement from the fathers can further demand changes in the other life roles of the mothers including their personal lives and careers. Most often mothers become the primary caregivers for their children (Ogoursova et al., 2021). In South Asian and Muslim countries, traditional beliefs encourage the social marginalization of children with disabilities, adding more responsibility to mothers for the well-being of these children (Jafree & Burhan, 2020). These children are commonly denied of their rights to be included in the society, further increasing the mothers' responsibility towards them. Due to the increased burden, mothers may experience more stress, low well-being and

happiness, more fatigue, and lack of sleep (Mousavi, 2020). Hence, many mothers struggle more than fathers caring for children with disabilities.

Recently, the traditional roles of parenting are changing, and fathers are getting more involved in their child's care. The fathers' involvement results in positive and developmental outcomes for their children (Ogourtsova et al., 2021). Despite fathers' increased involvement in the child's life, Ogourtsova et al. noted that the research on childhood-onset disability has focused primarily on the mothers. As indicated above, more expectations from mothers may affect their mental health, in addition to the physical and emotional challenges that they may face raising their children with disabilities.

Open communication and support systems can create space for individual strengths and vulnerabilities to be addressed, leading to a more fulfilling experience for both parents. By understanding these gendered differences and promoting equitable partnerships, families can navigate challenges more effectively and create a supportive environment for all members. More research is needed to explore the specific factors impacting mothers and their families across different contexts. Additionally, understanding mothers' perspectives on their need for professional support is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems.

Furthermore, these gendered expectations can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and limit the potential for both mothers and fathers to fully engage in their child's life, ultimately impacting the child's well-being. It is crucial to challenge these norms and promote a more flexible and inclusive approach to parenting, allowing both parents to contribute based on their strengths and interests, fostering a stronger family unit and a more fulfilling experience for all.

Besides the gender norms, they may also struggle with the non-acceptance of their child with disabilities in society. These children are treated indifferently and with a negative attitude

towards them. Due to this negative perspective of society, children with disabilities often face challenges that may prevent them from getting the right treatment and facilities in their lives.

Societal and Cultural Stigmas

Navigating societal acceptance for children with disabilities is a complex journey marked by both progress and challenges. Negative attitudes, fuelled by cultural beliefs and compounded by intersecting identities, can manifest as discrimination, bullying, and systemic barriers that hinder their access to opportunities and well-being. Society may not view the children with disabilities as equally capable as the children without disabilities, further treating them with discrimination on various grounds. This stigma may lead to detrimental effects on the interpersonal relationship within the family (Watanabe al., 2021) and include separation and discrimination experienced by others (Watanabe et al., 2021). Besides the other difficulties of raising a child with disabilities, stigma and discrimination towards these children can be the other major challenges for the parents.

People in rural areas have different beliefs and attitudes toward children with disabilities, depending on their culture (Namazzi et al., 2020). In most of the cultures in rural communities, the children with disabilities are treated with discrimination, unlike the other children without disabilities. These beliefs influence their understanding of developmental disabilities and their decision-making (Yacoob et al., 2022). Parents of children with ASD in Asian countries, experience stigma irrespective of their location (Liao et al., 2019). Some children also struggle to receive the right education due to their inaccessibility to services and highly trained professionals (Decker et al., 2021). Discrimination in health care for children with disabilities puts their parents at a higher risk of poor mental health (Ames et al., 2024). Therefore, both the children with disabilities and their parents may face discrimination from society on various grounds.

Indian Scenario

In many countries, people refrain from getting support from society due to the stigma. With the diversity in cultures, religions, social location, and socio-economic status of the people, it is important to illustrate the unique challenges and severity of parenting children with disabilities in other countries and cultures, where societal and familial expectations may add further complexity to the experience. To illustrate the complexity of parenting a child with disabilities, a vignette of an Indian family follows.

In India, raising a child with a disability presents a complexity of challenges due to limited social support, inadequate resources, and deeply rooted cultural beliefs. India has the world's largest child population who have a high risk for developmental disabilities (Hameed et al., 2021). Contradictory, the awareness among the public regarding children with disabilities is particularly poor in India. There is a lack of evidence on children with disabilities and their needs (Joshi & Angolkar, 2021). Clearly, the children with disabilities were not given enough recognition by the government and the general population in India.

The families in India are discouraged from seeking support and assistance due to the stigma attached to the disabilities in children (Mahomed et al., 2019). This can further restrict their access to appropriate healthcare and education (Kumar et al., 2020). Though the Indian Right to Education Act of 2009 allows the inclusion of children with impairments in regular classrooms, many children were denied access to education (Sharma, 2019). The major challenges in implementing inclusive education in India were the lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient training for the teachers (Nair & Krupa, 2023). Many children with disabilities were not provided equal treatment as other typical children. They were denied getting an education by the trained professionals.

The children with disabilities may lack the opportunities to interact, explore, and grow due to the stigma in the society. Families caring for children with intellectual disabilities face many challenges due to limited living standards and inadequate support systems (Joshi & Angolkar, 2021). Further exacerbating these obstacles is the deeply entrenched stigma surrounding mental health in India. This pervasive stigma, fuelled by misconceptions, prejudice, and discriminatory behaviours, acts as an invisible barrier that severely restricts access to crucial mental healthcare for both individuals with disabilities and their families (Hameed et al., 2021; Nair & Krupa, 2023). Therefore, raising children with disabilities can be a continuous challenge for many families due to the stigmatized society they live in. This fear of society's negative perspective can hold families back from reaching out for support.

Addressing this scenario requires a multi-pronged approach. Tailored support systems that meticulously consider the specific needs of families across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts are crucial (Joshi & Angolkar, 2021). Additionally, culturally sensitive interventions designed to dismantle the stigma gap are essential to promote help-seeking behaviour and unlock access to essential mental healthcare (Nair & Krupa, 2023). By implementing these strategies, society can begin to provide support for families raising children with disabilities in India.

In times of hardship, when the families of children with disabilities are struggling with numerous challenges in raising these children, support from their community can be crucial for them. Negative attitude towards these families and their children with disabilities can impact their whole lives. Fear of stigma from their society may prevent the parents from making efforts to help their children and give them a better life.

Cultural perceptions of disability, as documented by Watanabe et al. (2021), vary greatly, ranging from embracing to stigmatizing significantly impacting individuals' lives. Watanabe et al. observed that addressing these disparities requires fostering cultural awareness and sensitivity, ensuring the universal respect for rights and dignity. Moving forward, achieving true societal acceptance demands a multifaceted approach to tackling cultural attitudes, socioeconomic disparities, and legal and policy considerations. By fostering inclusive environments, promoting understanding, and ensuring equitable access to resources, society can pave the way for a world where all children with disabilities can thrive and reach their full potential (Novak-Pavlic et al., 2023). Thus, it is important to protect children with disabilities from any kind of discrimination and make their families feel empowered by treating them as equal to children without disabilities.

In some countries like India, children with disabilities are often cursed for their existence. Most often people discourage them from reaching out for support and living a normal life, which may make it hard for the parents of these children to live with respect and equality in society. Therefore, cultural and societal norms can heavily impact the way parents will reappraise a stressful situation. Furthermore, these parents must be supported physically, mentally, and financially. Having less adequate support from society can make the parents feel isolated.

Social Isolation

Similar to the Indian families, many other families across the globe struggle with social isolation (Currie & Szabo, 2020). It is a common experience, with parents frequently feel misunderstood and unsupported, which may exacerbate their emotional challenges. Family dynamics are also significantly impacted, as caring for a child with disabilities can strain relationships with partners, siblings, and extended family members. Differing coping

mechanisms and the emotional toll can lead to tension and conflict within the family unit. The educational and healthcare systems may present additional challenges, with limited access to specialists and long wait times creating barriers to optimal care. The psychological stress and anxiety associated with caregiving responsibilities can lead to burnout and compassion fatigue, further complicating the mental health of parents. Therefore, it is crucial that the parents of children with disabilities feel supported.

Importance of Social Connections

Strong social connections can act as a protective shield for the mental well-being of caregivers raising children or teenagers with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Research by Schiller et al. (2024) pinpointed that close and reliable relationships are essential sources of support, with partners, the child with ASD, and immediate family playing critical roles. Family support can be categorized into formal and informal support, including support from parents, extended family members, friends, and childcare providers (Xia et al., 2023). Adequate social support is one of the most important protective factors for parents of children with ASD (Ismail et al., 2021). Having social support can help the parents of children with disabilities to discuss their concerns with trusted people and feel less burdened.

Close relationships help the parents of children with ASD feel supported and validated. Notably, the couple's partnership emerged as a strong influence on caregiver mental health (Molero et al., 2024). This finding aligned with the research demonstrating higher depression rates among single parents of children with disabilities, underlining the significant impact of partner support (Kim et al., 2023). Social support can reduce parental pressure (Ismail et al., 2021; Schiller et al., 2024) and promotes a high level of satisfaction among them (Ismail et al., 2021). Ismail et al. also noted that extended family can help parents of children with disabilities

get brief breaks physically, mentally, and financially. The extended family can therefore share responsibility with the parents.

Despite the benefits of having support from extended family or community, many families prefer to manage on their own. In countries like China, personal support from friends and family is not a major factor in reducing maternal parenting stress, but they seek financial support from the government (Hsu et al., 2023). Therefore, support can be in any form including emotional, physical, or financial.

The parent-child bond also holds immense importance. However, depressed parents may face challenges in fostering this crucial connection, potentially leading to negative interactions (Staunton et al., 2023). Both the perceived quality of the relationship, such as viewing the child as a source of joy, and observed interactions like displays of warmth, can influence the caregiver's well-being. Parents make their best efforts to provide the same quality of care to their child with a disability and the other siblings (Ismail et al., 2021). Hence, despite the stress from the added responsibilities of raising a child with a disability, parents continue to work hard to provide the right care to all their children.

The presence of other children can be a double-edged sword. While some parents find support in their children without disabilities, the relationship is complex. The other children in the family often feel neglected due to the parents' major involvement in the life of a child with special needs. They may experience a sense of injustice, jealousy, and anger towards their siblings with disabilities. This feeling of rejection can result in hyperactivity, irritation, and aggression manifested in school and peer functioning as well as adaptation in among the other children in the family (Lada-Masko et al., 2024). Lada-Masko et al. also brought attention to research indicates that many siblings report a higher sense of responsibility, self-efficacy, and

pride in caring for their siblings with a disability. Therefore, some siblings of children with a disability may struggle with the challenges of acceptance and adapting themselves to the different family dynamics. But other siblings support their parents and share the responsibilities of caring for the child with disability.

Interestingly, the study by Gillespie-Smith et al. (2021) found that the perceived, rather than the received, support from formal services like respite care had a stronger connection to mental health. Caregivers have often identified respite services as the most helpful service received as they help lessen the caregiver's stress and prevent burnout. Smith et al. noted that respite is also important for the whole family unit since it has a positive impact on emotional well-being and physical strains. This aligns with broader research, suggesting that subjective experiences of support might be more influential for caregiver well-being than the mere availability of services.

By recognizing the importance of strong social connections and the nuanced interplay between different relationships, the mental well-being of caregivers raising children with ASD can be improved. Without social connections and support from the community, people may feel isolated and can struggle with mental health challenges. Social support helps mitigate the distress reported by parents and improve their psychological adjustment (Gillespie-Smith et al., 2021). This was experienced by the majority of people during the COVID-19 pandemic when families were mandated to isolate and stay at home for days. Both the children and their caregivers were exhausted and found it difficult to survive. The COVID-19 pandemic and related limitations to routine and lockdown arrangements made it difficult for children with disabilities and their caregivers to survive. Reduction in clinical, educational, and respite services for children with disabilities was challenging for the caregivers (Gillespie-Smith et al., 2021) Therefore, social

support is crucial for the parents of children with disabilities and helps them lower their stress, share their responsibilities, and understand their needs.

Caregivers of children with disabilities may face multiple challenges including mental health problems. Support from family members and the community is important for the caregivers in this difficult time as that can prevent the caregivers from feeling burdened and isolated. Both the children and their caregivers suffer when this support becomes restricted. Especially, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it became hard for the families of children with disabilities due to the restricted availability of services and support for them.

Impact of COVID-19

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease and is now recognized as a highly prevalent disease that affects a large number of people, especially the elderly and people with a background of health problems (Mousavi, 2020). The COVID-19 lockdown's impact on families was varied, with experiences differing significantly depending on pre-existing circumstances. Many children with developmental disabilities suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the cancellation or restrictions of the therapeutic services these children received from the health care providers (Filler et al., 2022). Filler et al. observed that this led to increased stress among caregivers of children with developmental disabilities, further impacting the development of the children. The researchers found that families grappled with managing childcare amidst work and personal responsibilities, leading to considerable stress. The restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the functioning of the families and made it difficult for the parents to manage the caregiving responsibilities of their children.

For families with children with disabilities, like those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the burden was particularly heavy. Research by Miniarikova et al. (2022) reported an

increase in challenging behaviours in children with ASD, especially among younger children. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the mental health of children with ASD and their parents (Minarikova et al., 2022). Parents became full-time educators and caregivers on top of existing demands, further exacerbating the difficulties faced by these children (Tokatly Latzer et al., 2021). Individuals with ASD struggled with adapting to new situations and receiving appropriate medical care due to the isolation which negatively impacted their progress. They reported difficulty with managing activities in routine, resulting in escalating behaviours (Tokatly Latzer et al., 2021)). Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic did not just impact the care of children with disabilities but also made it hard for parents to accommodate the changes that were brought about due to the lockdown.

Children with developmental disabilities struggled to receive the treatment and right care during the pandemic. Tokatly Latzer et al. suggested that the adult autistic population experienced inequality in terms of being excluded from appropriate care, poverty, unemployment and domestic violence during COVID-19. It was emotionally and physically challenging to raise a child with ASD under normal circumstances (Tokatly Latzer et al., 2021) therefore coping with the pandemic posed additional demands on these parents. Tokatly Latzer et al. found that anxiety about developmental regression and the lack of crucial therapy weighed heavily. The high levels of stress and lack of support among the parents of children with disabilities caused mental health problems for the parents.

Despite these challenges, the experience also revealed remarkable resilience and adaptability in many children with ASD, demonstrating their potential to thrive even under difficult circumstances (Tokatly Latzer et al., 2021). According to Tokatly Latzer et al., parents displayed remarkable creativity and flexibility, employing various strategies like virtual therapy,

safe group activities, flexible routines, exploring different food options, prioritizing quality family time, tailoring activities to their child's interests, and maintaining a positive attitude. This further underscored the crucial role of parental involvement for children with ASD. Ultimately, this experience emphasized the need for more adaptable support systems, particularly for families with children with disabilities. Tokatly Latzer et al. suggested it may involve utilizing technology for remote therapy and education, exploring alternative learning environments, and prioritizing efforts to support and empower parents. Understanding these diverse experiences and the unique challenges faced by families is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems to help them navigate similar situations in the future.

Individual and Parent Resiliency: A Positive Outlook

Despite the presenting challenges, raising a child with a disability can also unlock positive outcomes for families. Researchers have highlighted individual coping strategies like stress management and building healthy relationships with family are crucial for building resilience (Arif et al., 2021). Interestingly, research indicated that strong partnerships are promoted through dedicated time together, open communication, and shared decision-making (Downes & Cappe, 2021). Recognizing these factors can inform interventions that empower families to navigate their journey and not just survive but thrive.

Raising a child with disabilities presents unique challenges and stressors for parents. However, many parents show positive changes in their lives as they raise children with disabilities (Laufer & Isman, 2022). These positive outcomes despite the difficult and traumatic events have been the focus of the Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) model. The parents of children with disabilities experience multiple stressors, losses and burdens; yet, Laufer and Isman observed that these circumstances may provide them an opportunity to develop personal strength

and growth. In fact, parents of children with disabilities reported higher levels of emotional and psychological growth than other populations (Laufer & Isman, 2022). These parents can grow stronger from the difficult situations that they experience.

There are gender differences in PTG based on parental characteristics. For example, Laufer and Isman (2022) revealed that mothers generally reported higher overall PTG, particularly in personal growth and seeing new possibilities. Additionally, a study by Ingber (2004, as cited in Laufer & Isman 2022) found a possible link between parental involvement and parents' level of education. Laufer and Isman found that contrary to expectations, parents with lower education levels reported higher PTG across various dimensions. Laufer and Isman also reported that mothers who are highly educated may have higher expectations for their child. They may be more occupied with their career goals and hence, less involved with their children in comparison to the mothers with lower levels of education. Thus, less educated mothers may experience higher PTG than highly educated mothers due to their increased involvement in the child's life.

Overall, some mothers experience higher PTG than the fathers of children with disabilities. The challenges that align with the care of these children can make the mothers stronger through their experiences. Several factors seem to influence PTG in parents of children with disabilities.

Laufer and Isman (2022) identified feeling involved in decision-making regarding their child's education as a factor that is positively associated with PTG, particularly in areas like new possibilities, stronger relationships, and personal growth. The researchers suggested that having a sense of agency and control contributes to positive adaptation. Interestingly, the relationship between stress and PTG appears complex. While experiencing some stress, especially caregiving

stress, is linked to higher PTG, parental distress itself is not directly connected. Additionally, higher well-being correlates positively with most PTG dimensions except appreciating life. Similarly, parents who perceive their child's educational environment positively report higher PTG in aspects like relationships, emotional well-being, and overall growth. This highlights the crucial role of supportive and inclusive educational settings in fostering positive parental experiences.

Many parents of children with disabilities grow stronger as they experience hardships in their lives. Though every individual has their level of PTG based on their gender or education, they all view the burdens of life with a positive outlook. They often learn to cope with their stress and adapt themselves to the unexpected changes in their life. Hence, using different coping strategies can help the parents overcome the challenges they face.

Coping Strategies

Supporting families with children with disabilities requires a comprehensive approach that addresses individual needs, family dynamics, and systemic change. Coping strategies can initiate nurturing strong parent-child bonds fostered through clear communication and consistent expectations. Arif et al. (2021) pointed to a study that suggested that individuals use coping strategies, including social support, problem-solving and the regulation of emotions. These coping strategies help lower the stress levels of the individuals.

Coping is a dynamic process of managing demands (external and internal) that are appraised as exceeding the resources of a person (Liga et al., 2019). Coping strategies help individuals face every possibility and allow them to adapt to bad situations (Benatov et al., 2022). Though some families are at risk of developing mental health problems, some families positively cope and adapt to the stress of raising a child with disabilities (Benatov et al., 2022).

In fact, Benatov et al. observed that many families view this as an opportunity for extraordinary psychological growth. Despite various hardships, caregivers can cope and adapt to their child's issues (Ismail et al., 2021). Furthermore, they may show positive experiences and a dynamic attitude in managing their child with disabilities.

Seeking professional help, joining support groups, and prioritizing self-care equip parents with coping mechanisms and emotional strength. A Chinese study by McCabe et al. (2013, as cited in Ishtiaq et al., 2020) reported that parents of children with ASD benefited from the support groups as they viewed these groups as an opportunity to share experiences and relate to each other. Another study suggested that some parents of children with ASD not only reported low stress levels but also improved overall well-being and positive attitude towards their children as they used the coping strategies (Yaacob et al., 2022). Likewise, studies have found that religious beliefs and spirituality are used as coping strategies by some parents as they find these strategies helpful for their improved mental health (Benatov et al., 2022). Their strong faith in religion can help increase their level of patience and tolerance (Yaacob et al., 2022). The families may use these religious beliefs as their coping strategies as it helps them to trust the process and keep moving forward in life.

Mothers may experience higher stress and emotional difficulties in caring for their children with disabilities as they do not have enough support and resources which makes it hard for them. Abadiano and Englis (2022) observed that mothers face various challenges, highlighting the need for collaboration in creating a supportive environment. Their study emphasized the importance of understanding each child's unique needs and effective communication as key components, suggesting a focus on parental education and support programs in these areas. Abadiano and Englis noted that participants also emphasized the crucial

role of patience, love, and resilience, underscoring the need for caregiver training programs that equip individuals with coping strategies, resilience building, and practical skills. By working together across sectors and implementing these multifaceted strategies, society can build a more inclusive and equitable world where every individual with disabilities can flourish.

Many families may experience feelings of distress, and find it difficult to understand the situation, leading to uncertainty about the ways to proceed post-diagnosis (Rabba et al., 2019). However, in this difficult time, many parents make a comeback as they accept the diagnosis, embrace their child's unique challenges, and use coping strategies to handle the stress and tension they struggle with. Parents use a variety of coping strategies including self-care, joining support groups, following their religion, using respite services, and taking support from mental health professionals and other members of their community. These coping skills help the parents adapt themselves to these unexpected changes in their lives.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

The implication of this research highlights the experiences of married couples who are raising children with disabilities, a minority population. It also underscores the significant opportunity for further study and development of a counselling approach tailored to this group. This relationship is crucial to the overall health and well-being of the family, yet it remains unexplored in the literature. Counselling psychology plays a vital role in supporting parents of children with disabilities and addressing their mental health needs. Trained in a diverse range of therapeutic interventions, counselling psychologists provide tailored support to address the unique challenges faced by these parents.

There is an opportunity for practical applications from this research. Therapists in real-world settings can increase their awareness to better inform their selection of interventions based

on the individual family's needs and case conceptualization. Before exploring client-centred family therapy, couple therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), dialectal behaviour therapy (DBT), and mindfulness; it is beneficial to review a few foundations of therapy, the therapeutic alliance and the importance of empathy.

Psychologists use a variety of therapeutic interventions depending on the goals and needs of the parents. However, despite differences in approach, most therapists would agree that the relationship and alliance between the family and therapist is foundational to an effective treatment plan. Central to the therapeutic alliance (Ahn & Kivlighan, 2022) is a provision of emotional support through a safe and non-judgmental space for parents. The therapeutic alliance is crucial when supporting parents of children with special needs, as it fosters trust, empathy, and open communication, allowing parents to feel understood and validated in their unique struggles. A strong alliance helps create a safe space for parents to explore their emotions, fears, and challenges, facilitating deeper insight and growth. Additionally, this relationship empowers parents to build resilience, develop effective coping strategies, and advocate confidently for their child's needs.

Counselling psychologists can assist parents in processing their emotions and developing healthy coping strategies through empathetic listening and validation (Luterman, 2021). Hence, parents can feel supported if they get an opportunity to express themselves and share their thoughts and feelings in a non-judgmental space with the counselling psychologists. These psychologists can use their expertise and help the parents develop coping strategies to manage their mental health problems.

Furthermore, counselling psychologists offer advocacy support and educational resources to help parents navigate healthcare and educational systems. They equip parents with tools for

effective parenting tailored to their child's development and well-being (Bradshaw et al., 2019). Collaboration with community organizations and support groups connect parents with valuable resources and opportunities for social engagement, enhancing overall support networks (Bradshaw et al., 2019; Houtrow et al., 2022). Psychologists not only help the parents develop healthy coping strategies but also provide them with additional resources to connect to their community and understand the available support for them in the community.

The potential benefits of counselling psychology in supporting parents of children with disabilities are significant. Counselling psychologists can empower parents, improve parental well-being, enhance coping skills, promote positive family dynamics, reduce social isolation, and foster advocacy and empowerment, contributing to systematic change, and challenging stigma against individuals with disabilities and their families (Bradshaw et al., 2019). Therefore, parents of children with disabilities must get this support to enhance their mental health and well-being.

The risk of neglecting psychology's role in supporting parents of children with disabilities is considerable. Without increased understanding, families may face ineffective interventions, greater stress, and diminished quality of life. More specifically, poor parental mental health can have substantial repercussions for both the parents and the child. It can lead to reduced quality of life, further affecting the child's development and well-being (Overbeek et al., 2023). Parents struggling with mental health problems may lack the ability to provide quality care to their children, further affecting the child's well-being.

As stated above, parental mental health significantly influences the child's development and overall outcomes. Children with disabilities thrive in environments where caregivers exhibit emotional stability, offer consistent support, and can meet their unique needs adeptly. When parents struggle with mental health challenges, it can impede the child's progress, emotional

well-being, and overall quality of life. This underscores the imperative requirement for robust support systems and interventions aimed at fostering favourable familial dynamics and enabling optimal caregiving environments. This task can be effectively facilitated by counselling psychologists who are aware of the considerations when selecting a therapeutic approach.

Clinical Considerations for Individual and Group Supports

Psychologists use a variety of therapeutic interventions depending on the goals and needs of the parents. For example, by using standardized cognitive-behavioural techniques, counselling psychologists help parents challenge negative thought patterns, manage stress, and enhance problem-solving skills, reducing psychological distress associated with caregiving (Al-Takhayneh et al., 2023). There are different interventions suitable to the specific needs of the individuals.

Family counselling sessions foster open communication and family cohesion, and address interpersonal conflicts, promoting mutual understanding and collaboration in caregiving responsibilities (Li et al., 2023). Hence, counselling can help the parents in different ways, enabling them to manage their emotions and stress that is associated with bringing up children with disabilities.

Counselling psychologists use different psychological interventions to address the unique challenges and emotional toll that parents of children with disabilities struggle with. They provide the parents with a confidential and safe space where the parents can express their concerns without fear of judgement. Psychologists not only provide emotional support to the parents but also educate and connect them to community resources where they do not feel isolated. Using different psychological interventions, counselling psychologists can help the

parents understand their roles as parents, become aware of the child-parent relationship, and enhance their mental health as well.

The clinical considerations for supporting parents of children with disabilities are twofold. First, the counselling psychologists need to familiarize themselves with evidence-based research to support the parents' needs. Evidence-based practices that psychologists may use include but are not limited to client-centred family therapy, couple therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), and mindfulness (Lucas-Thompson et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2023; Rathod et al., 2019; Tayyebi et al., 2024). Second, parents can find support by engaging in individual, group and couple counselling with psychologists, who are qualified to facilitate counselling to this vulnerable demographic. Counselling psychologists use these specialized interventions to address the unique stressors faced by the parents of children with disabilities. Psychologists play an important role in understanding the challenges faced by the parents and tailoring interventions to their needs. It is important for psychologists to first get a deeper understanding of the individual they are working with. Psychologists may conduct an assessment in the beginning to understand the specific mental health challenges of the parents and their children and discuss the different psychological interventions with them suitable to their needs. It is crucial for psychologists to recognize the importance of family-centred care and collaborate with the parents, understanding that the parents' well-being directly influences the well-being and overall functioning of the children. Hence, it is important to first understand and discuss with the parents about their preferred way of seeking counselling services. Depending on their needs, parents can seek counselling support in different ways, for example, individual, group and couple counselling.

Individual Counselling

Individual counselling provides a warm and welcoming environment for the individuals, which allows them to feel comfortable with the psychologist. Individual counselling involves an interaction between the psychologist and the client; the parents raising children with disabilities. Through individual counselling, they can get an opportunity to lead the counselling session without any interruption as the psychologist's focus is solely on the individual (Andaroon et al., 2020). It provides the parents with a space to process their emotions and feelings without any fear of judgment or shame (Seager van Dyk et al., 2024). This approach helps the parents with a personal opportunity to receive support and experience growth during challenging times in life (Andaroon et al., 2020). Therefore, individual counselling can benefit parents who seek individual attention and a confidential space to express their emotions and feelings.

Individual counselling is effective in improving psychological distress among parents of children with disabilities (Lohan et al., 2021), enabling parents to provide better care and support for their children. Research suggested that individualized support from healthcare professionals helps parents improve their mental health and well-being (Gill et al., 2020). Individual counselling can benefit families that are initially hesitant to seek psychological help due to the stigmatized culture (Surapaneni et al., 2022). Individual counselling helps the parents who view that as an opportunity to share their concerns without any fear of judgment. Many parents prefer counselling in groups as they find a space to relate their problems with others and feel more supported by being a part of that community.

Group Counselling

Group counselling for parents of children with disabilities is an effective intervention for reducing parental stress and improving overall well-being. Studies have consistently

demonstrated that parents participating in group counselling experience significant reductions in stress and depression, as well as improved coping mechanisms and a better perception of their child's condition (Line et al., 2024). For instance, expressive-supportive groups have been beneficial in reducing stress and enhancing the sense of control among parents, highlighting the importance of the therapist-client relationship and peer support within the group setting (He et al., 2024). The supportive climate and the emotional expressiveness promoted in these groups are critical factors for successful outcomes.

Group counselling not only fosters a sense of community and shared experience among parents but may also provide other benefits as well. For those who prefer gender-specific groups, often used by mothers, have been found to address unique emotional and societal needs, further enhancing the therapeutic benefits (Alaedein & Al-Sharaa, 2020). Generally, group counselling offers cost-effective benefits compared to individual therapy (He et al., 2024). The perceived social support within these groups significantly enhances the therapeutic outcomes, as parents feel less isolated and more understood by their peers (Zuurmond et al., 2020). Hence, group counselling offers numerous benefits to the parents.

Furthermore, psychoeducational interventions within group settings have been linked to improved parental functioning and quality of life, providing both educational content and emotional support (Krstić et al., 2019). Group counselling can help parents expand their knowledge and skills to care for their children with special needs. Krstić et al. observed that a group approach allows one to better integrate information about their child's disability and manage the associated emotional stress. In addition to better integration of information, according to Alaedein and Al-Sharaa (2020), research has indicated that group counselling contributes to long-term stability in parental coping strategies and mental health improvements,

with effects sustained over time. Group counselling not only provides more emotional support to the parents but may also help enhance their knowledge regarding their child's diagnosis. Overall, group counselling for parents of children with disabilities is a valuable intervention that not only alleviates immediate stress but also promotes enduring psychological resilience and family well-being (Sharma et al., 2022).

Couples Counselling

Besides individual and group counselling for parents, psychologists may offer the parents to seek couples counselling, highlighting the potential benefits for their mental health. They may further help the parents by referring them to professionals who have expertise in couples counselling. The research emphasized that the incorporation of couples counselling can help couples enhance communication, reconnect emotionally, and understand each other's perspective (Ukeye, 2024). Couples counselling is defined as an art and science (Darwiche et al., 2022) that requires a joint effort to improve different aspects of parents' lives. This is an efficient approach (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020) that can help improve marital satisfaction and reduce their associated conditions (Darwiche et al., 2022).

Besides focusing on improving the marital relationship, couples counselling also helps with emotional intimacy, relationship cognitions, communication, and partner behaviours (Roddy et al., 2020). Couple relationship plays an important role in contributing to positive family dynamics (Molero et al., 2024). As discussed earlier in this literature review, disturbed relationships between the couple may also impact the care of their children with disabilities. Therefore, psychologists can use counselling interventions to improve family dynamics and limit adverse outcomes in children with disabilities by supporting the marital relationship (Ukeye,

2024). Furthermore, opportunities for parents to engage in couples counselling can help them understand their differences and reconnect with each other.

Parents can opt for any of these approaches or a combination of approaches – individual counselling, group counselling or couples counselling – but the psychological interventions used within these approaches will depend on the goals of the parents and case conceptualization by the psychologists.

Clinical Considerations and Therapeutic Approach to Support Parents

Four major psychological interventions used in counselling are acceptance and commitment therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, dialectical behavioural therapy, and mindfulness. Markedly, mindfulness is an important component of the three modalities but is also used as a separate intervention in counselling. CBT, ACT, DBT, and mindfulness approaches are proven to be effective in reducing distress among parents and can be offered both individually and in group settings.

All these modalities can benefit parental stress, but the success of treatment will depend on many variables, including the therapist and client relationship, the parent-client needs, and their level of understanding. The psychologist will choose an intervention depending on their case conceptualization, as each of the modalities has their own philosophies. Notably, all of these interventions are more helpful when there is a collaboration between the families and the counselling psychologists. Therefore, family-centred support is of utmost importance.

Client-Centred and Family-Centred Support

Client-centred and family-centred support for parents of children with disabilities can integrate empowerment and help-giving philosophies. It emphasizes collaborative partnerships between families and healthcare professionals (Chung et al., 2022). This approach, recognizing

that families are integral to a child's well-being, involves shared decision-making and effective communication, fostering a respectful and dignified caregiving environment (Murphy et al., 2024). Core principles of this model include flexible clinical practices, comprehensive care delivery, and active family engagement in care processes (McCarthy & Guerin, 2022). Additionally, imparting specific information and providing family education and skills development is essential to operationalizing this model, ensuring that parents are well-informed and capable of participating actively in their child's care (McClintock, 2024). Effective family-centred care necessitates organizational support, interprofessional coordination, and a commitment to building trusting relationships with families (Murphy et al., 2024). Murphy et al. observed that this holistic approach improves care quality, enhances family satisfaction, and fosters better health outcomes for children. Family-centred care emphasizes that family is constant in the child's life, therefore it is important to collaborate with the family to promote their interests, safety and well-being.

Client-centred support for the mental health of parents of children with special disabilities includes a range of support options, including individual counselling, group counselling, training, webinars, and workshops. Considering the disturbed family dynamics of children with disabilities, it is crucial to recognize the need for flexibility in treatment for these parents. To support the need for flexibility, there are several therapeutic modalities that can be used by psychologists. Interventions including ACT, DBT, CBT, and mindfulness are evidence-based approaches that parents seek in counselling.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

ACT is an effective approach for reducing stress and psychiatric symptoms for the parents of children with disabilities. ACT presents a promising framework for empowering

parents of children with special needs (Byrne et al., 2021). In contrast to conventional therapeutic approaches that emphasize modifying thoughts or behaviours, ACT prioritizes the acceptance of complex emotions while encouraging actions that align with personal values (Morimoto, 2022). This intervention allows the clients to accept the distressing or unwanted feelings as a part of their lived experience instead of trying to modify these thoughts or feelings. ACT helps to train the parents to more functionally and flexibly deal with their stressors.

ACT equips parents with six foundational processes aimed at decreasing the suffering and increasing their well-being (Gloster et al., 2020). The initial process of acceptance allows the parents to acknowledge and embrace their thoughts and emotions without trying to change them. Additionally, ACT incorporates defusion techniques, enabling parents to detach themselves from unproductive thoughts and helps increase flexibility in responding to their experiences (Parmar et al., 2021). ACT helps the parents to accept and embrace their distress and view their thoughts as passing events rather than absolute truths.

For instance, a parent grappling with their child's developmental setbacks may learn to perceive the thought "I am inadequate as a parent because my child faces challenges" as merely a thought, rather than an accurate depiction of reality (Juvin et al., 2021). Mindfulness practices constitute another integral facet of ACT, encouraging heightened awareness of the present moment and enabling parents to maintain engagement even amidst adversity (Morris et al., 2023). This fosters deeper connections with their children and facilitates more effective responses to challenging situations (Li et al., 2023). Therefore, mindfulness practice is an important part of the ACT intervention, which encourages paying attention on purpose in the present moment.

Moreover, ACT assists parents in identifying their core values, such as fostering a nurturing environment or promoting their child's independence (Juvin et al., 2021). Aligning actions with these values imbues their parenting journey with purpose and significance. Juvin et al. observed that the concept of committed action equips parents with strategies to undertake purposeful actions that are in line with their values. This may involve advocating for their child's needs, seeking out support networks, or prioritizing self-care, even in the face of obstacles (Li et al., 2023). By fostering resilience and motivation, committed action empowers parents to navigate their challenges (Parmar et al., 2021). Hence, committed action helps the parents to redirect their behaviour toward their values.

Finally, ACT emphasizes self-compassion (Juvin et al., 2022), teaching parents to extend kindness and understanding to themselves, particularly during moments of self-doubt. Juvin et al. observed that ACT helps parents to accept their child's diagnosis and face that diagnosis with resiliency. It promotes acceptance rather than avoidance.

Parents of children with disabilities experience high levels of stress. ACT helps these parents recognize the chronic nature of their caregiving challenges and the difficult feelings associated with them. Numerous studies have consistently shown positive outcomes for parents engaging in ACT interventions, with reductions in stress, anxiety, and depression contributing to enhanced mental well-being (Byrne et al. 2021; Gloster et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Maughan et al. 2024). Research has suggested that psychological acceptance helps improve the well-being of parents of autistic children (Maughan et al., 2024). Through the cultivation of greater psychological flexibility, parents can adapt more effectively to challenges and navigate the complexities associated with raising a child with disabilities. ACT promotes mindful and value-driven parenting practices, fostering more positive interactions between parent and child. The

heightened self-compassion fostered by ACT also contributes to resilience and mitigates parental burnout. These positive transformations have a beneficial impact on the emotional and behavioural well-being of children, creating a supportive family environment (Holmberg et al., 2023). Meta-analyses have underscored ACT's effectiveness in reducing depression, anxiety, and enhancing overall quality of life (Gloster et al., 2020). Studies by Byrne et al. (2021) and Maughan et al. (2024) affirmed ACT's positive impact on parental well-being and coping strategies across diverse challenges like autism. Ultimately, ACT equips parents with psychological flexibility and resilience, fostering a nurturing family environment beneficial for both caregivers and children.

Another modality worthy of comparison and consideration is cognitive behaviour therapy. Though ACT differs from the traditional forms of CBT in many ways, both interventions aim at increasing the well-being of parents of children with disabilities. ACT emphasizes the context of the psychological phenomenon rather than the content and form of thoughts and feelings, as aimed by cognitive behavioural therapy (Byrne et al., 2020). CBT helps individuals cope with negative thoughts, but ACT aims at changing one's relationship to their thoughts and emotions and promotes openness, awareness, and psychological flexibility.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

Many parents of children with disabilities may experience chronic stress. CBT is an effective approach that can help in reducing stress-related problems. CBT emphasizes a connection between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, and suggests that changes in one component induce changes in the others (Li et al., 2023). For example, psychological distress in parents of children with ASD may result from the interaction between their thoughts about their child's disability and the resulting emotional responses. The effectiveness of CBT in reducing

psychological distress, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress, has been well-documented (Golshani et al., 2021). Meta-analyses indicate that CBT is particularly effective in reducing stress in the parents of children with intellectual disabilities through the use of psychoeducation and enlisting them as collaborators in elements of therapy (Bate, 2024). Therefore, it can be beneficial to incorporate facets of CBT into parent training that can help reduce these unhelpful beliefs and increase positive beliefs (Mueller & Moskowitz, 2020). Research has also supported the effectiveness of CBT in parents dealing with various childhood psychopathologies, including anxiety, depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, disruptive behaviours, and traumatic stress (Dollberg et al., 2023). Therefore, the goal of CBT is to focus and modify the thoughts and behaviours which will further help the parents to respond to stressful situations more positively.

CBT helps the parents of children with disabilities to recognize distortions in their thinking patterns that create problems and helps them gain a better understanding of their behaviour. Furthermore, CBT equips them with a variety of different tools that help them to change their thinking patterns and develop a greater sense of confidence in their abilities.

CBT is well known as the first-line treatment for several mental health difficulties (Agako et al., 2023). However, Agako et al. suggested that CBT may not be adequate in targeting emotion dysregulation. DBT, on the other hand, is considered the most evidenced-based treatment targeting emotional dysregulation. CBT emphasizes recognizing the cognitive distortions and helping the parents to redirect their thoughts, but DBT helps the parents to accept themselves and manage their emotions to better regulate the harmful behaviours.

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)

DBT is an effective approach for people having difficulty managing and regulating their emotions. DBT is based on the theory of pervasive skills deficit, aimed at facilitating the learning, embedding, and generalization of new skills through a blend of acceptance and change strategies (Shareh & Yazdanian, 2023). Learning new life skills and incorporating them into their everyday routine can strengthen the parents' capacity to cope with the daily stressors. DBT helps the parents learn these life skills that help them tolerate ambiguity and rest their minds, body, and spirit. They can prepare themselves and use the skills when a crisis occurs. The four major skills of DBT are distress tolerance, emotional regulation, mindfulness, and interpersonal effectiveness (Morales et al., 2022). Incorporation of these DBT skills into parent training helps with significant social-emotional improvements in children (Zalewski et al., 2020). DBT aims to help enhance parents' capabilities in day-to-day life.

DBT incorporates dialectical principles, which emphasize the interconnectedness of the world, the synthesis of opposing views, and the inevitability of change, fostering a holistic approach to treatment. It helps the parents to accept the reality of their lives and their behaviours, and helps them learn to change their lives, including their unhelpful behaviours.

DBT incorporates mindfulness as a key component of change that emphasizes awareness and acceptance. Mindfulness involves increasing awareness of self and context, adopting a non-judgmental stance, and focusing on the present moment to identify effective actions (Zalewski et al., 2023). This mindfulness facilitates wise mind' states, wherein emotional experiences are synthesized with logical thought to generate effective solutions and support effective parenting (Zalewski et al., 2023). Using the DBT approach, psychologists can use various strategies, including problem-solving skills or skills training to help parents reduce emotional dysregulation

(Ratnaweera et al., 2021). Furthermore, mindfulness techniques in DBT play an important role in enhancing the parents' ability to manage their emotions, cope with stress, and improve their relationships.

Parents participating in DBT reported improved relationships with their children and partners that further improved their quality of life (Ratnaweera et al., 2021). Overall, DBT significantly alleviates stress and emotional disorders among caregivers, enhancing their coping abilities and overall well-being (Shareh & Yazdanian, 2023). DBT teaches emotion regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness that can benefit caregivers experiencing high-stress levels and emotional disturbances.

ACT, CBT, and DBT all incorporate mindfulness as an important component. However, mindfulness can be used in counselling as an independent intervention as well. To date, there seems to be limited research stating that mindfulness can be a therapeutic modality on its own, yet two older studies by Kostanski and Hased (2008) and Wei et al. (2015) argued that mindfulness can be an effective therapeutic modality.

Mindfulness Techniques

Mindfulness techniques serve as a robust psychological intervention for parents of children with disabilities, offering a structured approach to navigating the complexities of caregiving. Rooted in the definition of mindfulness as the intentional, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment (Elgendy et al., 2020), the concept of mindful parenting promotes compassion and understanding in parent-child interactions (Liu et al., 2021). Mindful parenting was subsequently conceptualized and measured by Duncan et al. (2009, as cited in Liu et al., 2021) as outlining five crucial dimensions: compassion, non-judgmental acceptance, attentive listening, emotional awareness, and self-regulation. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that

parents exhibiting higher levels of mindful parenting engage in more positive parenting practices, including improved communication, authoritative parenting, and enhanced emotional regulation during conflicts (Shaffer, 2020). Using these important components of mindfulness, the parents can be more attentive in the moment.

Psychologists can incorporate psychoeducation about mindful parenting in the sessions with the parents. Mindful parenting allows parents to perceive their children with unbiased and open attention without prejudgment, allowing for more sensitive and responsive reactions to their children's needs and behaviour, instead of reacting automatically (Elgendy et al., 2020). Moreover, these parents experience fewer psychopathological symptoms and reduced parental stress (Liu et al., 2021). In Western cultures, higher levels of mindful parenting correlate with fewer internalizing and externalizing symptoms among children (Liu et al., 2021). Therefore, mindfulness helps reduce the stress for parents of children with disabilities, further improving their mental health.

Furthermore, several empirical studies demonstrated a significant decrease in parental stress following participation in the Mindful Parenting Program (MPP), underscoring the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions in alleviating caregiver burden (Liu et al., 2021). A comprehensive review of existing literature underscored the efficacy of mindfulness-based programs that help reduce parental stress, enhance emotional regulation, and improve empathic concern, thereby fostering positive parent-child relationships (Shaffer, 2020). Mindfulness increases the awareness of thoughts and feelings for the parents and helps manage them better rather than feeling overwhelmed.

The mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program has emerged as a clinically standardized intervention that demonstrates efficacy in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression

while promoting overall well-being (Shaffer, 2020). Shaffer noted that parents participating in MBSR exhibit significantly lower stress and depression levels, along with greater life satisfaction. Hence, mindful parenting guided by counselling psychologists, bolstered by mindfulness-based interventions, equips parents of children with disabilities with invaluable tools to navigate caregiving challenges with resilience, compassion, and enhanced well-being.

Consequently, it is important to highlight that counselling plays a major role in improving the mental health of parents of children with disabilities. There is a variety of evidence-based modalities used in counselling, as discussed in this paper. Psychologists use these modalities to address the unique needs of the parents and provide them with the appropriate treatment. Though counselling involves both risks and benefits, it is a service that aims to provide knowledge, guidance, and emotional support to the parents.

All the psychological interventions highlighted above have value and evidence to support efficacy. While modalities including CBT, DBT, ACT, and mindfulness are all used by psychologists to help reduce stress in parents, their effectiveness depends on the severity and vulnerabilities of the needs. Families and parents may differ in experiencing these unique challenges depending on a variety of factors, including their socioeconomic status, cultural background, and beliefs.

There are, however, more optimal modalities to use depending on the circumstance. For example, while CBT focuses on stress reduction in parents by helping them understand the connection between their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Dollberg et al., 2023), DBT helps parents who experience intense emotional reactions (Shareh & Yazdanian, 2023). In contrast, if the parent presents with rigid thinking where modifying their thoughts is not helpful, psychologists use ACT in that case, as this intervention helps to accept and embrace those

thoughts and feelings (Maughan et al., 2024). The effectiveness of these interventions depends on the expertise of the psychologists, a deeper understanding of the needs of children, and the amount of parental involvement. It is the responsibility of the psychologists to understand and respect the cultural beliefs of the families and offer the treatment without any judgment or biases, which can further impact the effectiveness of therapy. Therefore, when trying to implement a modality in counselling, it is crucial for the clinicians to understand the challenges and needs of each parent thoroughly, as each family may identify as having a different concern. Similar to the previously mentioned Indian scenario, tailored support systems, culturally sensitive interventions, and a focus on dismantling the stigma gap are essential for effective mental health initiatives.

Psychologists have the expertise to offer support, interventions, and strategies to help improve the mental health of parents of children with special needs. It is important that psychologists also use this expertise to raise awareness about the mental health challenges faced by children with disabilities and their parents in society. They can advocate for the development of policies to prioritize the mental health of children with special needs and their families.

Advocacy

Advocacy involves taking the initiative to promote access to mental health services and combating stigma and discrimination. Newbigging and McKeown (2007, as cited in Forestieri et al., 2024) presented a thorough model for child advocacy. Their model underlined the pivotal roles of speaking out, speaking up, and speaking for children. Advocacy in counselling aims at increasing feelings of self-empowerment and belongingness in families of children with special needs. Advocacy encourages the removal of external and institutional barriers to the well-being of the families.

The psychologists who advocate may focus on the systematic changes that are needed to create justice for all the communities, including marginalized individuals (Elmadani & Post, 2023). There are a variety of institutional and organizational forms of advocacy. Clinical advocacy involves offering psychological support within healthcare settings, acknowledging their distinct challenges, and participating in their clients' environment (Foresteiri et al., 2024). Psychologists partaking in group advocacy would craft tailored mental health programs to alleviate stress and bolster coping mechanisms (Goldberg & Smith, 2024). For example, Goldberg and Smith suggested that psychologists could collaborate with allied groups generating momentum and cultivating political awareness with the hopes that it will lead to parental mental health support and promote family resilience. Psychologists who are more familiar with this area could offer their time to help train other clinicians. Professional advocacy involves supporting mental health experts in advancing parents' needs within professional circles, ensuring robust policy agendas (Forestieri et al., 2024). One of the more difficult ways to advocate is legislative advocacy. Forestieri et al. observed that this involves the psychologists in engaging policymakers to advocate for policies supporting parental mental well-being through various channels. Psychologists can adapt different forms of advocacy to fit their personal or professional resources.

Since counselling psychologists play a vital role by offering targeted psychoeducational programs to assist parents in managing stress and developing coping strategies (Bradshaw et al., 2019), they may make a significant impact with collaboration. Through collaboration with healthcare providers, psychologists ensure a comprehensive approach to integrating mental health services into the child's medical care, addressing both physical and psychological aspects (Houtrow et al., 2022). These concerted efforts significantly enhance the quality of life and

mental health outcomes for parents of children with disabilities (Bradshaw et al., 2019; Houtrow et al., 2022). Hence, advocacy is possible in many forms if psychologists collaborate with other healthcare providers.

The mental health of parents of children with disabilities and the benefits of their involvement in the treatment of children is getting recognition, but there are quite a few gaps that need to be addressed. The unique challenges faced by the parents have not been comprehensively explored. Therefore, this paper highlights the gaps and discusses the fundamental next steps in research.

Fundamental Next Steps for Research

The mental health of parents of children with disabilities is an increasingly critical area of study. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of tailored interventions, parental involvement in the development and evaluation of these interventions remains limited. This gap must be addressed to ensure that the interventions are acceptable and meaningful to parents, as well as aligned with outcomes that are important to them (Bradshaw et al., 2019). Future research should thus prioritize the involvement of parents in intervention development, a practice that is becoming increasingly required for service development and research funding. The implementation of remote and flexible interventions, according to Bradshaw et al., since they can be facilitated by existing multi-disciplinary teams and do not require geographical proximity or strict schedules, further highlights the potential for broader parental participation. Hence, it is crucial that the research focuses on the interventions emphasizing parental involvement in the treatment of their children.

Though parental involvement is important, future research is needed to understand if therapy aimed at children or parents alone is more effective than therapy aimed at parent-child

dyads (Li et al., 2023). Research should explore these different conceptions of centered care, considering the strengths and weaknesses of each in various settings. Partnerships between parents and service providers are essential in providing care for children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (PIMD). This partnership involves shared expertise, information, and decision-making. It is crucial that the parents are equipped with training to help their children. Elgandy et al. (2020) suggested that psychoeducational programs and mindful parenting training should be given to all the parents of children with disabilities, which will help increase their well-being and decrease their stress symptoms. Despite numerous studies emphasizing parental involvement in treatment of the children, there are yet-to-be-clearly defined, evidence-based interventions that focus on the mental health of parents of children with disabilities.

Previous reviews have identified promising approaches to reduce stress among parents of children with disabilities. These approaches include care coordination models, respite care, telemedicine, peer and emotional support, and health-related support for parents (Bradshaw et al., 2019). However, the efficacy of these models could be increased if these supports are better informed by the research, specifically emphasizing the parental relationship as the core dynamic within the family.

Pre- and post-assessments of the parent-child relationship and the family atmosphere can also provide data on effectiveness, which can help the psychologists understand if the interventions are working (Dollberg et al., 2023). It is not enough that the mental health professionals support the children and their parents, it also depends on the family's home environment and the relationships within the family. It is crucial for psychologists to assess that time to time.

Research should also focus on identifying the most effective interventions to address the unmet mental health needs of mothers of children with developmental disabilities (Alaedein & Al-Sharaa, 2020). It is possible that the mothers' mental health can be neglected especially if they are stay-home mothers and care for their children with disabilities (Yoosefi et al., 2021). Addressing their concerns and helping them with tools is critical for their mental health.

By addressing these fundamental next steps in research, a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities can be achieved. Future research must prioritize understanding the marital relationship of parents raising children with disabilities, parental involvement in intervention development and evaluation, adopt broader conceptualizations of stress, and focus on family-centered outcomes. This approach will ensure that interventions are meaningful and effective, ultimately improving the mental health and well-being of parents of children with disabilities. Therefore, psychologists must make efforts to ensure that their research findings reach the policymakers, who can further make the required changes in the system.

Recommendations for Practice

Parents of children with disabilities may face a unique set of challenges that can significantly impact their mental well-being. This necessitates a multifaceted approach from counselling psychologists to support their mental health. Forestieri et al. (2024) emphasized the urgent need for improved quality of information provided to service users and carers. Clinicians should ensure that information is clear, concise, and tailored to individual needs. Melton (2018, as cited in Forestieri et al., 2024) recommended that psychologists create a plan for regular self-reflection. They should use practices that lead to the understanding of the diverse cultural influences on their own beliefs, thinking, behaviour, and worldview. It is important for

psychologists to tailor to the needs of the parents from different cultural backgrounds from an unbiased stance. They should identify the potential gaps in care and address those needs to provide parents with the best possible outcomes. Therefore, it is recommended that psychologists reflect on their practice regularly, make their best efforts to understand the cultural beliefs of their clients, and work with them accordingly.

Furthermore, ensuring information is delivered in an easily understandable way is crucial. Complex medical terminology can be overwhelming for parents already facing a stressful situation (Cox & Fritz, 2022). Psychologists should strive to explain diagnoses and treatment options in clear, layman's terms, and encourage parents to ask questions. Utilizing visual aids, pamphlets, and reputable online resources can further enhance understanding and empower parents to participate actively in their child's care. Therefore, culturally competent psychologists may consider using approachable language for communicating diagnosis and treatment options to parents. It may help strengthen the therapeutic alliance and decrease additional stress for parents, therefore making it possible for them to understand and process information.

Equipping professionals with parent-child coaching (PCC) skills is crucial. Training workshops, as suggested by Alaedein and Al-Sharaa (2020) for autism care centers, can enhance confidence, knowledge, and practical experience in the professionals to apply PCC within a flexible framework. This allows for responsiveness to unique needs and crises. Training should encompass not only the technical aspects of PCC but also the development of strong therapeutic rapport and communication skills. Hence, it is recommended that psychologists attend regular training workshops, which can help them deliver the treatment to the standard needed to achieve the expected results.

As much as the professionals require training, it is equally important to involve the parents of children with disabilities in therapy. Li et al. (2023) advocated for therapies that address parental needs within the broader context of child treatments. This holistic approach can significantly boost the effectiveness of interventions for both parents and children. Traditionally, treatment may have focused primarily on the child's needs. However, research suggested that including parents in the therapeutic process can yield significant benefits.

When parents are equipped with skills and strategies to manage their stress and cope effectively, they are better able to support their children's emotional well-being as well. Therefore, psychologists may offer the parents to join their child in the sessions or invite them for individual sessions.

Psychologists should further acknowledge and address systematic and organizational factors that influence the well-being of the parents of children with disabilities. The Canadian government has invested in child advocacy centres to promote the development of a workforce that actively listens to, trusts, and believes in the capacity of parents/children to be involved in care decisions (Racine et al., 2021). This collaborative approach may help in empowering the parents of children with disabilities. Moving beyond a purely informative approach, psychologists should involve parents as active partners in the decision-making process. This can be achieved through open communication, exploring parents' values and preferences, and ensuring they feel their voices are heard and respected. Hence, psychologists may step forward to address the gaps in the system that prevent parents from getting services for their children. Collaborating with the parents can also help in addressing the barriers to counselling services.

There are barriers that may prevent families from accessing needed services, including counselling services. Such barriers include but are not limited to cost barriers for parents of

children with disabilities (Ukeye, 2024). While many families are covered through public insurance, others still experience financial strain related to their child's treatment and care. Ukeye's research suggested that increasing funding for assistance programs and increasing flexibility around workplace leave may help families facing economic hardship. This indicates a need to explore beyond government support for facilitating the financial burden among caregivers of children with disabilities. Therefore, psychologists may help the parents by reducing their cost for services, offering a sliding scale to low-income households, or connecting the parents with agencies that offer counselling services for a low fee. This can help the parents explore their options and expand their knowledge about the other resources that are available in the community.

Another barrier to counselling services can be the parents' ability to commute to the counselling clinics. This could be due to various reasons including the parents' schedule, no transportation, and lack of commitment to therapy. The web-based delivery of treatment may help the parents overcome geographic barriers (Moroz et al., 2020). Therefore, these efforts by psychologists may help remove any barriers for the parents of children with disabilities and can help them feel empowered.

Continuous research is paramount in developing and refining evidence-based practices for supporting the mental health of parents of children with disabilities. Collaboration between researchers, psychologists, and parent communities is crucial in ensuring interventions are effective, accessible, and meet the evolving needs of this population. Mental healthcare is a constantly evolving field, and ongoing research is essential to ensure parents of children with disabilities have access to the most effective and up-to-date interventions. Researchers can benefit from the expertise of psychologists who work directly with parents and understand their

specific challenges. Parents, on the other hand, can provide valuable insights into their needs and preferences, helping to shape the development of more effective interventions. By working together, these stakeholders can ensure that research findings translate into practical applications that improve the lives of both parents and children.

By implementing the above-mentioned recommendations, counselling psychologists can play a vital role in mitigating the challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities and fostering their mental well-being. This will ultimately contribute to a more positive and supportive environment for both parents and children.

Self-Reflective Statement

As a mental health professional, working with parents of children with disabilities presents unique challenges and ethical considerations, necessitating a deep reflection on my practice and a commitment to upholding ethical principles while providing effective support. The immense emotional pain that these parents face is considerable, given the ongoing demands of caring for a child with disabilities, navigating complex healthcare systems, and potential feelings of isolation. Recognizing the concept of “social location,” as described by He et al. (2024), is crucial, as parents of children with disabilities occupy a unique social position within the healthcare system, requiring tailored and sensitive support. As a mental health professional, it is my responsibility to promote the involvement of parents in counselling to better support them and their children. I hope that this literature review is one step toward my goal to raise awareness and disseminate information about the intersectionality faced by families of children with disabilities. Upholding ethical principles is paramount in my work with this population. Informed consent, for instance, takes on particular significance (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2019) and helps ensure that information is clear, concise, and tailored to the individual needs of the

clients. Complex medical terminology can be overwhelming for parents, already facing a stressful situation, making it vital to adapt communication styles. Therefore, it is my responsibility to enhance their understanding and empower parents to actively participate in their child's care.

The principle of respect for autonomy, as outlined by the Canadian Psychological Association (2017), is reflected in the importance of collaboration and empowerment. Moving beyond a purely informative approach, involving parents as active partners in the decision-making process is crucial. This collaborative approach can empower parents and foster self-esteem, as noted by Seager van Dyk et al. (2024). Furthermore, I am mindful of potential social and cultural factors that may influence their communication styles and decision-making processes, underscoring the need for cultural humility and ongoing education to ensure culturally appropriate interventions and avoid stereotyping.

Ethical dilemmas may arise when a parent's mental health poses a potential risk to the child's well-being. Balancing confidentiality with the duty to protect children requires careful consideration, as outlined by the Canadian Psychological Association (2017). Open communication and exploration of safety plans are crucial in such situations, and collaboration with other healthcare professionals involved in the child's care can be vital in navigating these complex scenarios.

The field of mental health is constantly evolving and supporting parents of children with disabilities requires ongoing learning and adaptation. I acknowledge the limitations in current research on supporting this specific population. Staying informed about emerging evidence-based practices and participating in relevant training opportunities is crucial to ensure the provision of the most effective interventions possible.

By fostering a safe and supportive space, employing evidence-based interventions, and upholding ethical principles, mental health professionals can play a vital role in mitigating the challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities and fostering their mental well-being. This, in turn, can contribute to a more positive and supportive environment for both parents and children. Ultimately, my commitment lies in providing comprehensive and culturally sensitive care that empowers parents to navigate the complexities of raising a child with disabilities and prioritize their mental health.

Conclusion

The collective findings underscore the critical importance of addressing both the emotional and practical challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities. Raising children with disabilities presents an intricate array of financial, emotional, social, and familial challenges, profoundly impacting the mental well-being of parents. The emotional toll of caregiving, coupled with financial strain and social isolation, often leads to significant stress, which in turn affects family dynamics and the developmental environment for the children. It is crucial to acknowledge the vital role parents play in their children's growth and well-being, as their mental health directly influences the overall functioning of their children.

Counselling psychology holds a critical role in addressing these unique challenges by providing evidence-based interventions, such as CBT, ACT, DBT, and mindfulness techniques, tailored to enhance parental well-being and improve family dynamics. These different modalities help the parents to reflect on the problematic patterns of interaction between them and their children, learn from experiences, and contribute to improving their mental health as well. Thus, it is important to plan interventions that emphasize the collaboration of parents of children with disabilities and mental health professionals.

Empowering parents through these therapeutic approaches helps them cope with the complexities of caregiving while fostering resilience and positive outcomes for both themselves and their children. Moreover, promoting coping mechanisms like self-care, social support, and focusing on their child's strengths can further reduce the burden and improve their overall quality of life.

In countries such as India, where cultural, societal, and systematic factors add further complexity, it is essential that psychologists advocate for culturally sensitive support systems, dismantle stigma, and develop inclusive policies. By fostering collaboration between researchers, psychologists, and parent communities, continuous research and flexible interventions can ensure that the unique needs of parents are met. Tailored support systems, equitable access to resources, and awareness of the multifaceted struggles faced by these families are key to fostering a supportive environment where both parents and children can thrive.

Ultimately, by prioritizing the mental health of parents and working towards comprehensive and culturally informed interventions, society can empower families of children with disabilities, enabling them to navigate their journeys with greater resilience and success.

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Appendix

Article	Sample size	Selection/ Recruitment	Data Collection Process	Data Analysis Process	Qual/ Quan/ Mixed	Notes on Findings
Arif, A., Ashraf, F., & Nusrat, A. (2021). Stress and coping strategies in parents of children with special needs. <i>Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association, 71</i> (5), 1369–1372. https://doi.org/10.47391/JPMA.1069	150	Parents of children with special needs from three special schools in Lahore, Pakistan. Purposive sampling technique.	Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI) and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) were used. Translated into Urdu for comprehension.	Data analyzed using SPSS 24. Correlation analysis.	Quantitative	High stress correlated with increased use of disengagement strategies. Cognitive restructuring was the most common coping strategy. Parents generally used positive and practical strategies.
Brown, M., Whiting, J., Kahumoku-Fessler, E., Witting, A. B., & Jensen, J. (2020). A dyadic model of stress, coping, and marital satisfaction among parents of children with autism. <i>Family Relations, 69</i> (1), 138–150. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12375	69 couples	Married, heterosexual couples raising children with ASD were recruited via e-mails to 170 Autism Society regional and state chapters and Facebook postings. Participation was based on self-identification as parents of	Data were collected through an online survey hosted by Qualtrics. Participants completed measures of dyadic coping (Dyadic Coping Inventory), marital satisfaction (Kansas Marital Satisfaction scale), and parenting stress (Friedrich's short form of the Questionnaire of Resources and Stress).	Path analysis models using the actor-partner interdependence model were used to examine the relationships between dyadic coping, marital satisfaction, and parenting stress. Missing data were imputed using the series mean replacement method. Model fit indices	Quantitative	Dyadic coping was positively associated with marital satisfaction and negatively associated with parenting stress. Marital satisfaction negatively correlated with parenting stress, and some associations between dyadic coping and parenting stress were mediated by marital satisfaction. Developing relationship-based coping strategies can reduce parenting stress.

		children with ASD.		included chi-square, comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).		
Lui, M., Lau, G. K., Tam, V. C., Chiu, H. M., Li, S. S., & Sin, K. F. (2020). Parents' impact on children's school performance: Marital satisfaction, parental involvement, and mental health. <i>Journal of Child and Family Studies, 29</i> , 1548–1560. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01655-7	507 Grade 4–6 children and their parents	Invitation letters were sent to the principals of all 573 mainstream primary schools in Hong Kong to recruit Grade 4 to Grade 6 children and their parents as participants. Five schools located in four different districts in Hong Kong participated in the study.	Survey responses were collected using a questionnaire survey comprising scales adopted from previous studies. The questionnaires were completed by both parents and children, covering aspects such as marital satisfaction, parental involvement, psychopathological symptoms, children's internalizing behavior, school engagement, and academic performance.	Data were analyzed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to examine the internal structures of the scales, followed by Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the relationships between the latent variables in the proposed model. Missing data were imputed using the expectation-maximization (EM) algorithm.	Quantitative	Structural equation modeling revealed that parents' marital satisfaction had a significant indirect effect on children's academic performance via two pathways: 1. Parents' psychopathological symptoms, children's internalizing behaviors, and school engagement as mediators. 2. Parental involvement and school engagement as mediators. Marital satisfaction had no direct effect on school engagement or academic performance. The findings highlight the importance of parents maintaining harmonious relationships with their spouses and being highly

						involved in their children's education to promote children's academic development.
Minarikova, E., Vernhet, C., Peries, M., Loubersac, J., Picot, M. C., Munir, K., & Baghdadli, A. (2022). Anxiety and depression in parents of children with autism spectrum disorder during the first COVID-19 lockdown: Report from the ELENA cohort. <i>Journal of Psychiatric Research, 149</i> , 344–351. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2021.11.022	134 pairs of parents (first objective), 94 mothers and 79 fathers (second objective), 94 mothers (third objective)	Parents were invited via the ELENA database electronic system, reminders sent via e-mail or telephone, 30 questionnaires administered by telephone	Data collected using HADS and a structured online COVID-19 Questionnaire, information collected from parents during the lockdown and the last ELENA follow-up visit	Paired sample t-tests, Pearson chi-square, Fisher exact tests, Student's t-tests, Wilcoxon rank-sum tests, multivariate logistic regression, adjusted for time since diagnosis, goodness-of-fit assessed using Hosmer and Lemeshow test	Quantitative	Parents' AaD levels were lower during the lockdown compared to the last ELENA visit, AaD levels more pronounced in mothers, associated with child's challenging behaviors, teleworking, perceived knowledge about COVID-19, insufficient knowledge as a risk factor for mothers' AaD, highlights the importance of assessing mental health of caregivers, considering gender characteristics, providing relevant information during a pandemic, future studies needed for long-term effects
Sit, H. F., Huang, L., Chang, K., Chau, W. I., & Hall, B. J. (2020). Caregiving burden among informal caregivers of people with disability. <i>British Journal of Health</i>	234	Caregivers of individuals with intellectual or mental disability in Macao, China	Data were collected from August to September 2018 using face-to-face interviews conducted by 16 trained research	Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between	Quantitative	Caregiving burden and perceived difficulty were associated with depression, anxiety, and stress. Internal coping buffered the effect of perceived difficulty on

<p><i>Psychology</i>, 25(3), 790–813. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12434</p>		<p>were recruited when service users were dropped off or picked up at local rehabilitation centers or via phone call.</p>	<p>assistants at five centers affiliated with the local rehabilitation organization. Measures included the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), Caregiving Burden Inventory (CBI), Perceived Difficulty Scale (PD), and a modified Chinese Coping Scale.</p>	<p>caregiving burden, perceived difficulty, coping strategies, and mental health outcomes. Descriptive statistics summarized demographics and mental health outcomes. Correlation analyses examined the interrelationships between caregiving burden, perceived difficulty, coping strategies, and mental health outcomes.</p>		<p>depression and anxiety, while external coping exacerbated the effect of perceived difficulty on anxiety and caregiving burden on depression and anxiety. Interventions that improve internal coping and mental health might be helpful for aging informal caregivers.</p>
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