

Adjustment Needs and Coping Strategies for Parenting Children with Special Education Needs

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Abstract

This study investigated the adjustment needs and coping strategies for parenting children with special education needs in Uyo metropolis of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The study adopted the survey research design because the variables under investigation had already in place. The population of the study comprised all parents of children with special needs in Uyo metropolis. The sample size for the study consisted of 70 participants who were drawn through purposive sampling technique. One research question and four hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. Independent t-test was used to test hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 while percentage and ranking order was used to answer the research question. The results indicated that parents of special needs children necessarily make social, environmental and psychological adjustments. The result also indicate that parents engage multi-disciplinary team of experts, use religious solace, share their experience with other parents and just accept the reality of their child's disability as strategies to cope with the task of parenting children with special needs. Based on the results of the study recommendations were proffered to help parent take on their responsibilities with courage and tact.

Keywords: Parenting, children, special education needs, coping, strategies, adjustment.

Introduction

It is the expectation of every parent to have children who are normal in every respect. The process of conception through pregnancy to delivery is full of challenges. Complications during this process can result in any kind of disabilities. In some cases even when the child is born normally hale and hearty, unforeseen life circumstances may interfere with the process of growth and maturation resulting in the dreaded conditions of disabilities. As Agali (2008) opines, some women may have perfect delivery while some may give birth to a child with one disability or the other, thus giving rise to moments of anxiety. As a parent, discovering that something may stand in the way of your child's success can be unsettling and difficult. Whether or not a child has a learning disability, the way the parents behave and what they *do* has the most impact on the child's chances of success. When this condition shows up in a child either at birth or later in life, it places numerous difficulties on both the child and his parents. The presence of a child with disability in family can be really devastating for many parents. When disability inhibits an individual to function normally like his peers then a handicapping condition is established. It is the handicapping condition that draws the distinction between the disabled and the non-disabled.

A handicapping condition makes a child require special attention, materials and methods to make him benefit from the mainstream of education and the society. Children with handicapping conditions are usually referred to as children with special needs.

Kanu (2006) states that a handicapping condition is a state of being at disadvantage because of impairment or a disability which hinders an individual from fulfilling a role that is normal. The handicap person suffers a whole lot of limitation in performing day-to-day activities (Agali, 2008). The bulk of difficulties that disability places on a child is borne by his parents, and as a result, parenting a special needs child becomes a very challenging task to unsuspecting parents.

Children with special needs include but not limited to the following; the mentally retarded, learning disabled, orthopedically impaired, hearing impaired, visually impaired and the autistic children. Parents who have children with any of these disabilities are usually referred to as parents of children with special needs. It is no doubt that such parents necessarily need to make some adjustments in order to be able to cope with the enormous task of parenting such a child. According to Stone (1990) adjustment is the ability of an individual to fit in with the way of the society. Parents of children with special needs are sometimes stigmatized, labeled, looked down upon and pitied like their disabled child. In order for these parents to succeed as parents, they need to make adjustment, socially, psychologically and environmentally. Parents of children with disabilities daily face a daunting array of decisions in support of their children. Family care-giving involves medical, educational, emotional, and psychological support, both for the children with disabilities and for other family members (e.g., siblings). This study presents information to help parents of children with disabilities find the answers, support, and strategies they need to be successful advocates for their kids while keeping their family strong. They also have to device some coping strategies. It is therefore the task of this study to assess the adjustment needs and coping strategies that parents of children with special needs would adopt to successfully provide support for their children with disabilities. Parents many times have to cope with shock, stress and ridicules. Highlights are also made of successful coping strategies.

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of this study was to identify areas of adjustment necessary for parenting children with special needs and the strategies that parents of children with special education needs can utilize to cope with the demands of parenting children with special needs. The study aims at providing and equipping parents of special needs children with information, strategies and resources necessary for coping with enormity of the task of parenting. This study is not only of benefit to parents but also both children with special needs, their siblings and significant adults who work with children with special needs as in-loco-parentis at home or in school.

Statement of the Problem

Parenting is a desired status every grown up adult would like to assume at one time or another. Parenting is sure very demanding even for parents of normal children. The task of

parenting a child with special needs seems to be very traumatic to many people who find themselves in it. Psychological trauma and social stigma place several unimaginable options before such parents. It is common place to see that such children are treated with reckless abandon in our society. If this trend must stop and something positive begins to happen then parents must be able to adjust properly to the task and devise strategies that work well for them to become the parent they needed to be or are expected to be. It is therefore the task of this study to identify such areas of adjustment and coping strategies.

Research Question

1. What are the coping strategies utilized by parents of children with special needs.

Null Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the social adjustment need of parents of children with disabilities and that of parents of normal children.
2. There is no significant difference in the environmental adjustment need of parent of children with special need and that of parents of normal children.
3. Parents of children with special needs do not differ significantly in their psychological adjustment need from the parents of normal children.

Methodology

The design of the study was survey research design of ex-post facto type. This this is relevant because the research did not manipulate any variable but to study already existing phenomena. The population of this study comprised all parents of children with special needs in Uyo Metropolis of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Uyo metropolis is the capital city of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. It is one of the most populous cities in the south-south geo-political zone. The population of families with at least one child with special needs was 98,538 (National population census, 2003).

The sample of the study consisted of 70 parents of both special needs children and the normal children. 30 of them were parents of children with special needs and 40 parents of normal children. The samples were purposively selected from parents who have children in special education centre, Mbiabong in Uyo. This sample size was due to the fact that parents who send their children with special needs to school are few. This sample size however consists of 10% of the total population. Purposive sampling was based on the following criteria;

- (1) Parents who have children with any of the categories of special needs.
- (2) Parents who have special needs children in the Special Education Centre (SEC) Uyo.
- (3) Parents who were willing to participate in the study.

Two instruments were used for this study. These were, the Parents Adjustment Need Questionnaire (PANQ) and Coping Strategies for Parenting Special Needs Children (CSPSNCQ). The former was self constructed while the later was adapted from Agail (2008). The self-constructed instrument was made up of two sections. Section A merely introduced the researcher and aims of the study to the respondents. Section B, contained 20 items to elicit responses on the social, environmental and the psychological adjustment needs of the

parents and the second instrument contained 15 items on coping strategies. Respondents were to indicate their opinion by ticking strongly agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Strongly Disagreed (SD) and disagreed (D). The rating of the responses were as follows SA = 4, A = 3, D = 2, SD = 1. Instruments were validated by three experts in the field of Test, Measurement and Evaluation. In order to ascertain the reliability of the instrument, the test re-test reliability method was used. The instrument was administered to a group of 30 respondents who were not part of the sample of the study. Two weeks interval was given before the instrument was administered the second time. The reliability co-efficient obtained were .75 and .62 respectively. These indicated strong reliability. The instruments were therefore considered to be adequately reliable for the study.

Related t-test was used to test null hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 while the frequency distribution, percentage and ranking order was used to answer the research question. Coping strategies were ranked from 1st to last. This was prompted by the need for precision and statistical accuracy. The results are shown in tables hypothesis by hypothesis.

Results

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the social adjustment of parents of children with special needs and parents of normal children.

Table I: Related t-test analysis of social adjustment of parents of children with special needs.

Variables	x	$\frac{df \text{ childre}}{x}$	SD	t- cal
Social adjustment of Parent of Special need children	92	9.2	2.18	1.69
Social adjustment of Parent of normal children	876.57	2.62		

Table 1, indicates that the calculated t-value was 1.69 while the critical t-value was .044. The calculated value is greater than the critical value therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence there is a significant difference in the social adjustment between parents of children with special educational needs and those of the normal children. This means that parents of children with special needs have very serious and urgent need of social adjustment. Parents who are socially adjusted can cope adequately with the responsibility of parenting a child with special educational needs.

Null Hypothesis 2: Parents of children with special needs do not differ significantly in their psychological adjustment need from the other parents.

Table 2 : Analysis of psychological adjustment needs of parents of children with special needs

Variables	x	$\frac{df \text{ of p}}{x}$	SD	t-cal
Parent of special need children	102	2.91	3.4	2.5
Parents of normal children	120	3.43	1.10	

Significant at .05, df = 68 critical t-value = .044

Table 2 reveals the calculated t-value 2.5 and the critical t-value .044 with 68 degree of freedom at .05 level of significance. This shows that the calculated value is greater than the critical value. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. Consequently, the alternate hypothesis was accepted, meaning that, parent of children with special needs differ significantly in their psychological adjustment needs. This indicates that while parents of children without special needs may not be psychologically traumatized, the parents of children with special educational needs are psychologically traumatized. Hence, the need for psychological adjustment in order to cope adequately with their parenting task.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in the environmental adjustment need of parents of children with special needs and other parents.

Table 3: Analysis of environmental adjustment need of parents of children with special needs.

Variable	X	$\frac{(x_1 - x_2)}{SE}$	t-cal		
Parents of children with special needs	106	3.4	3.04	1.6	
Other parents	101	2.5	1.99		

significant at .05 level, df = 68, critical value = .044

Table 3, reveals that the calculated t-value 1.6 at .05 level of significance, with 68 degrees of freedom, is greater than the critical value. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. This means that there is significant difference in the environmental adjustment need of parents of special needs children. The environment where children with special needs are catered for is of a very significant importance. Therefore parents of children with special needs actually need to make significant environmental adjustment to accommodate the children with special needs.

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no significant difference in the coping strategies of parents of children with special needs and other parents.

Table 4: Distribution and ranking of responses based on parents coping strategies.

S/N	Strategies	Score	Frequency	%	Ranking Ord
1.	Engaging a multi-disciplinary team	32	8	25.39	1 st
2.	Sharing experiences with other parents	24	6	19.04	2 nd
3.	Religious solace	24	6	19.04	2 nd
4.	Accepting the reality	16	4	12.69	3 rd
5.	Seeing myself as able	12	3	9.32	4 th
6.	Seeing the positive sides of life.	8	2	7.97	5 th
	Being more assertive	6	1	6.35	6 th

Table 4, shows the distribution and ranking of responses of parents of children with special needs on the coping strategies they would utilize in parenting their children. Ranking highest is the strategy of engaging a multi-disciplinary team of experts (25.39%) to come 2nd are the strategies of sharing experiences with other parents of special needs children and turning to religious solace (19.04%) each. Ranking 3rd (12.69%) were parents who have accepted the reality of their child's disabilities and therefore tend to cope with the situation. 9.32% saw themselves as be equal to the task of parenting special needs child. This coping strategy ranked 4th. While those who are coping by seeing the positive sides of the life of their child, ranked 5th with 7.97%. From the table the least utilized coping strategy is the strategy of being more assertive with 6.35%

Discussion of the Findings

Null hypothesis 1, indicated that there is a significant difference between the social adjustment need of parents of children with special needs and other parents. Parenting a special needs child comes with social discrimination and isolation. Parents of such children are always described or called by the type of disability their child has. People point fingers at them behind, and sometimes openly make derogatory comments about their child's disabilities. In Africa generally and Nigeria particularly disabilities are always believed to be a consequence of an evil act done by the child or his parents either in their former life (reincarnation) or in the present world. Parents of children with disabilities are therefore looked upon as witchcraft, wicked people who are the reward of their evil. This social stigma may lead to frustration, anger and sadness. It is no doubt a huge challenge that parents face day in and day out. This finding is collaborated by Bunch (2011) that parenting a physically disabled children comes with many challenges on daily basis. Only well adjusted, ones can succeed as parents. In order to make proper adjustment, such parents must come to terms with the demands of this enormous responsibility. They require psychological adjustment to understand that they have the duty of protecting, providing and preserving their child, the disability notwithstanding. Without adequate psychological, emotional and social adjustment no parent can cope with the task of parenting a disabled child. In the light of the foregoing Obani (2004) state unequivocally, that once it has been established that your child has a disability, the first and most important thing to do is to come to grips with the situation. Accept the condition and accept the child as being different from your other children. The next level of adjustment requires that such parent take their time to read and acquire a good body of information about the particular disability that their child has. Again parents of disabled children need to join voluntary organizations interested in the disability that affects their child. With these adjustments parent can be properly equipped to cope better with the troubles of parenting a child with disability.

Null hypothesis 2 reveals that parents of children with special needs require some form of psychological adjustment in order to be really good parents to their children with special need. Having to parent a special need child is psychologically devastating. Psychological trauma that parents go through in raising a child with special need, leads to

family rejection, abandonment of such children. Cooney, Jahada, Gumley, Knott (2006) opine that families of children with special need experience psychological stress, as such need help. Sailor (2004) on the other hand opine that for parent to be psychologically adjusted to cope with the task of parenting a special needs child, they should be helped to find out all they can about the disability, treatments and resources available for the child. Developing a support system, being kind to one another and not taking out anger on each other (ie. father on mother vice versa or both on the child) and viewing the whole child with his or her strength and weaknesses. These will provide a platform for this child, like other children to develop a positive self-image and achieve educationally as much as possible.

Null hypothesis 3, reveals that there is a significant difference in the environmental adjustment need of parents of children with special needs. The child-friendly environment features soft toys, plush carpeting, and an environment tailored to children with special needs. Parents who lived in a storey building without a lift may have to reconsider acquiring a new accommodation on the ground floor in order to accommodate the needs of the child with orthopedic impairment, mental retardation or any other disability that requires architectural modification to suit the special needs of the child. This finding is in line with Villa & Thousands (1995) that developing adaptation and accommodation for a child with special needs is a continuous process that involves the child's parents. The first step is to assess the child's abilities and the environment where the child will be spending time. All these are the parents responsibilities, hence environmental adjustment need of the parent is inevitable. Dennis (2012) also agreed with this finding, according to him acquiring a new building will include spaces to enhance therapy and learning, a specially designed playground, sensory garden and sensory room. While the school caters for children with complex learning and development challenges such as cerebral palsy, global development delay and various genetic syndromes, and offers speech, occupational, art, physical and language therapy as part of its daily curriculum.

Null Hypothesis 4 ranked responses of parents of children with special needs and found that the coping strategy that comes first in the rank order is the strategy of engaging a multi-disciplinary team of experts. Multi-disciplinary team consists of a counsellor, psychologist, teacher, special educator, social worker and care-giver. Each of these experts play very significant role in working with families of special needs children. Another effective strategies are, sharing experiences with other parent and turning to religious solace by sharing experiences with other parents and turning to religious solace. These coping strategies are collaborated by Orchid (2000) a team of professional working with special need children can help families of such children cope with the shock, trauma and difficulties involved in raising children with special needs. This is also collaborated by Curtis (2000) who advised parents, thus; try to link up with an organization which has specialist information about your child's disability. You will find the tips they can give you will be invaluable. Make sure you know your child's rights about education, and search out

information about Special Needs' playgrounds. Orchid (2000) also noted that talking with other parents, both of with and without disabilities may be a better strategy for mother.

Chatting online to other parents who share their concerns, and learn from other parents, who have already fought some of the battles which you foresee ahead. As one parent said to new parent, 'my advice for new parents is you should never take "no" for an answer'. So find your voice and make yourself heard whether it is to a medical, or educational professional. Your child deserves nothing less. Seeing the positive side of life for your child is useful in parenting a child with special needs. Some parents keep their child's learning disability a secret, which can, even with the best intentions, look like shame or guilt. Without knowing, extended family and friends may not understand the disability or think that your child's behavior is stemming from laziness or hyperactivity. Once they are aware of what's going on, they can support your child's progress (Gina-kemp, Smith, & Segal, 2012). Within the family, siblings may feel that their brother or sister with a learning disability is getting more attention, less discipline and preferential treatment. Even if your other children understand that the learning disability creates special challenges, they can easily feel jealous or neglected. Parents can help curb these feelings by reassuring all of their children that they are loved, providing homework help, and by including family members in any special routines for the child with a learning disability.

Conclusion

This study examined the adjustment needs and coping strategies of parents of children with special needs. Parenting is a challenging task for all parents. It is especially challenging, tasking and stressful for those whose children have special needs in one or more areas, as such adjustment needs are inevitable for them. Social stigma, misunderstanding and psychological trauma that come with the task of parenting a special needs child make it necessary that such parent be socially, psychologically, economically and environmentally adjusted to carry out their duties as parents. Inability of some parents to make adjustment and device a coping strategies have push them to taking some inhuman step of getting rid of the child and so on.

This study provides six coping strategies for parents of special needs children. The first is to engage a multi-disciplinary team of expects such as, counsellor, psychologist, social worker, special educator and the regular educator teachers. These will provide needed succor for parenting children with special needs. The second is to turn for religious solace. Knowing that all children are gift from God religion can really provide a solace for parents of children with special needs. Again another strategy for coping with the situation is sharing experiences with other parents.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are proffered.

1. Multi-disciplinary team services should be put in place by the government of the day and made accessible to parents of children with special needs at all levels.

2. Parents of children with special needs should come together and form a forum or association registered with the ministry of internal affairs. This will help them to meet regularly and share ideas, experience and mount an advocacy for their children.
3. Government agencies and Non-governmental organization should put in place machinery for assisting parents of children with special needs. For instance if government gives grants and allowances to parents of children with special needs it will go a long way to boost their morale and make them take adequate responsibilities for their children with special needs.
4. Parents should see their children with special needs as blessing from God just like the normal children. This will help parents to gladly make necessary adjustments and sacrifices for their children.
5. Parents should endeavour to see the positive sides of the life of their child with special needs. Realizing that disability is not inability, they should capitalize on strength of their child.
6. For parents to overcome social stigma, sense of shame related to parenting a child with special needs, parents should learn to freely take the child for shopping, sightseeing and children shows, talk freely with the child about everything worthwhile.
7. Legislation and policies should be enacted to grantee parents rightto appropriate facilities that will assist them raise their child with disabilities.

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