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Parental Stress among Parents of School-Going Children Iin Ernakulam City, Kerala: A Descriptive Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract: ***Background: Parental stress is a multidimensional psychosocial experience shaped by parenting demands, perceived resources and family responsibilities. This study assessed parental stress among parents of school-going children in Ernakulam City, Kerala, and examined selected demographic correlates. Methods: A quantitative descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted among 295 parents recruited through a broad electronic invitation and voluntary participation. Data were collected using the 18-item Parental Stress Scale (PSS) by Berry and Jones (1995). Descriptive statistics, independent-samples t tests, one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation and chi-square analysis were used. Results: Mean PSS score was 49.71 (SD = 9.13; range 22–86). Using the study's operational bands, 53 (17.97%) participants had low, 236 (80.00%) moderate and 6 (2.03%) high stress. The most prominent stress experiences concerned time/energy demands, concerns about doing enough for children, limited control, competing responsibilities and limited flexibility. No significant gender difference was found (t = −1.19, p = .236), and employment, education and number of children were also non-significant. PSS internal consistency was α = .843. Conclusion: Moderate parental stress was predominant. Findings support family-centred and preventive approaches addressing role overload, time pressure, perceived control and competing responsibilities.***

Keywords: parental stress; school-going children; Parental Stress Scale; parenting; family functioning; Kerala; psychosocial well-being

1. Introduction

Parenting is a continuing psychosocial responsibility involving caregiving, emotional support, discipline, supervision, educational guidance and preparation of children for increasing independence. During the school years, responsibilities expand to homework supervision, school communication, transportation, academic decision-making, extracurricular activities, digital-device monitoring and coordination of family routines. These demands occur alongside occupational, financial and household responsibilities and may contribute to psychological strain.
Parental stress refers to distress associated with the parenting role and is influenced by child characteristics, parental psychological resources and contextual factors such as social support, financial circumstances, work demands and family relationships. From a transactional perspective, the same demand may be appraised differently according to perceived coping resources and sense of control. Family-oriented models similarly emphasize interactions among economic and social stressors, parental well-being and family functioning.

The school-going period deserves attention because schooling introduces another major social environment into family life. Parents must support academic adjustment while encouraging autonomy. Academic expectations, examinations, homework, peer issues and digital technology can create recurring parent–child negotiation. Research reviewed in the thesis indicates that parenting hassles, child behaviour, sleep disturbance, social support, economic pressure and work-family demands may contribute to parenting stress.

Evidence from India and Kerala remains comparatively limited, particularly for community samples of parents of school-going children without a specific clinical condition. Nithya, Farseena, and Thomas (2021) reported no significant difference in parental stress between mothers and fathers in a Kerala sample. Shireen et al. (2024), in a South Indian sample including Kerala participants, reported an inverse association between parental stress and spousal support. The present study therefore described parental stress in Ernakulam City and examined selected demographic variables. Because the design was cross-sectional, associations were not interpreted as causal.

2. Objectives

- To assess parental stress among parents of school-going children.
- To examine the association of gender, employment status, educational level and number of children with parental stress.
- To compare parental stress levels between mothers and fathers of school-going children.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design and setting

A quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive cross-sectional survey design was used in Ernakulam City, Kerala. The electronic questionnaire was circulated through parent networks, schools, residential communities, professional groups and social-media channels.

3.2 Participants and sampling

The target population comprised parents or eligible primary caregivers of school-going children residing in the study area. The final analytical sample consisted of 295 parents. Recruitment was voluntary and electronic; therefore, the achieved sample is appropriately characterized as a voluntary-response, non-probability sample. Eligible participants were adults who were parents/primary caregivers, resided in the study setting, could complete the questionnaire independently, provided informed consent and supplied sufficient PSS responses. Ineligible, duplicate or insufficient records were excluded.

3.3 Instrument and ethics

Parental stress was assessed using the 18-item Parental Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Berry and Jones (1995). The scale assesses both positive experiences of parenthood and negative experiences such as resource demands and stress. Responses are recorded on a five-point scale; eight positively worded items are reverse scored, and total scores range from 18 to 90, with higher scores indicating greater parental stress. Permission for electronic use was obtained through email communication. Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was .843. Informed consent was obtained electronically and participation was voluntary. The supplied thesis did not state a named ethics committee approval number; this should be confirmed and added before submission if required.

For descriptive presentation, the thesis classified 18–41 as low, 42–65 as moderate and 66–90 as high stress. These were operational study classifications, not universally validated clinical cut-offs.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through Google Forms. All 295 records contained complete PSS responses. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were used descriptively. Independent-samples t tests compared two groups; one-way ANOVA was used for more than two groups; Pearson correlation examined number of children and continuous stress scores; and chi-square tested gender versus operational stress categories. Statistical significance was set at .05.

4. Results

4.1 Sociodemographic profile

Of the 295 participants, 187 (63.4%) were female and 108 (36.6%) male. Most were married (292; 99.0%). Education was below Grade 10 for 10 (3.4%), Grade 10 to below graduation for 80 (27.1%), and graduation or above for 204 (69.2%). Participants had one child (46; 15.6%), two (163; 55.3%), three (64; 21.7%), four (17; 5.8%) or five (4; 1.4%). Employment data recorded 214 (72.5%) as employed, 40 (13.6%) as not employed/homemakers, with 41 (13.9%) missing/invalid.

4.2 Overall parental stress

Mean PSS score was 49.71 (SD = 9.13), with observed scores from 22 to 86. Low stress was found in 53 (17.97%), moderate stress in 236 (80.00%), and high stress in 6 (2.03%). Thus, moderate stress was the predominant operational category.

4.3 Item-level pattern

The most prominent stress-related experiences were childcare requiring more time and energy than available (M = 3.66, SD = 0.87), worry about doing enough for children (M = 3.56, SD = 0.93), too few choices or too little control over life (M = 3.27, SD = 0.98), difficulty balancing responsibilities because of children (M = 3.26, SD = 1.00), and limited time/flexibility (M = 3.24, SD = 1.00). Lower-scored indicators included finding children enjoyable (M = 1.93, SD = 0.72), happiness in the parental role (M = 2.03, SD = 0.79), enjoying time with children (M = 2.20, SD = 0.89), and satisfaction as a parent (M = 2.28, SD = 0.95).

4.4 Demographic comparisons

Gender was not significantly associated with PSS score ($t = -1.19$, $p = .236$); mothers had M = 49.22 (SD = 8.89) and fathers M = 50.56 (SD = 9.52). Employment status was not significant ($t = -0.83$, $p = .412$). Educational level was not significant, $F(2,291) = 2.09$, $p = .126$. Number of children did not show a significant group difference, $F(4,293) = 1.07$, $p = .370$, and its correlation with stress was weak and non-significant ($r = .112$, $p = .055$). Gender versus operational stress category was also non-significant ($\chi^2 = .53$, $p = .768$).

5. Discussion

The principal finding was that parental stress was common but predominantly moderate in this sample. The mean PSS score of 49.71 and the concentration of 80% of participants in the operational moderate category indicate meaningful perceived strain for many respondents. Item-level findings suggest that time and energy demands, concerns about parental adequacy, limited flexibility/control and competing responsibilities were especially salient. These findings are compatible with family and transactional perspectives in which stress reflects interactions between demands, appraisal and available resources.

Stress coexisted with positive parental experiences. Respondents continued to report enjoyment, happiness and satisfaction in parenting, indicating that role strain does not necessarily imply poor attachment, rejection of children or lack of parental motivation. Parents may value parenting while simultaneously experiencing substantial demands.

No significant gender difference was observed, consistent with the Kerala study by Nithya et al. (2021). The present data do not establish that mothers and fathers experience identical stressors; they show only that overall PSS scores did not differ significantly. Employment status and education were also non-significant. The smallest education subgroup contained only 10 respondents, limiting interpretation. Number of children showed a weak positive,

non-significant association; unequal group sizes further limit interpretation.

From a community perspective, the predominance of moderate stress supports preventive approaches such as psychoeducation, coping-skills training, time-management strategies, realistic parenting expectations and appropriate referral pathways. Support can be made available to both mothers and fathers rather than restricted to one demographic category.

6. Strengths and Limitations

Strengths include the complete available dataset of 295 respondents, use of a recognized 18-item measure, inclusion of mothers and fathers, and item-level analysis. Limitations include voluntary electronic recruitment, potential selection and response bias, limited generalizability, cross-sectional design, self-report measurement and missing/non-standardized demographic entries. The operational stress bands should not be treated as universally validated clinical cut-offs.

7. Implications

Psychologists and health professionals can provide psychoeducation on stress recognition, coping, emotion regulation, time management and realistic parenting expectations. Parent programmes may encourage role negotiation, support seeking and constructive communication between parents and schools. Persistent or severe distress with functional impairment should prompt professional assessment. Future studies should examine social support, parenting self-efficacy, financial strain, coparenting, child behaviour, academic pressure, sleep and parental mental well-being using larger and more representative samples.

8. Conclusion

Parental stress was a meaningful psychosocial concern among parents of school-going children in Ernakulam City, with moderate stress predominating. The major stress-related experiences involved time and energy demands, concerns about parental adequacy, competing responsibilities, limited flexibility and perceived lack of control, while positive emotional engagement remained evident. Gender, employment status, educational level and number of children were not statistically significant correlates in this sample. The findings support a multidimensional, family-centred understanding of parental stress and highlight the need for early identification, preventive support and further research into contextual and relational factors.

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