



Communicating Research in Clear Language

Behaviour Problems and Parenting Stress

What is the research about?

Many families of children with special needs face daily challenges. Their child's behaviour can be difficult, and cause stress for their parents and siblings. The researchers wanted to know if behaviour problems are more severe and more frequent in children with developmental delays compared to children without developmental delays. They also wanted to know if both the mother and father in each family agreed on the severity and stressfulness of these behaviours. The researchers then tried to sort out if the child behaviour caused parental stress, and if parent stress levels also affected child behaviour problems.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers interviewed 82 families of children aged 3 to 4 with developmental delay, and 123 families of non-delayed children aged 3 to 4, in Central Pennsylvania and Southern California. The parents filled out a variety of surveys used to assess the child's level of delay, frequency and severity of behaviour problems, and if a two-sided relationship exists between child behaviours and parental stress.

What did the researchers find?

Based on the parents' opinions, the researchers discovered that children with developmental disabilities appear to have more frequent and more severe behaviour problems than their non-delayed peers. Plus, they found there was higher parental agreement about behaviour problems for children with delays than without. This may be because of increased levels of shared parental responsibilities in the delayed group. Furthermore, they found that stress levels were much greater for parents of children in the delayed group. Lastly, this study also found that problem child behaviours and parenting stress both have negative effects on each other.

Take home message

Compared to the parents of typically developing children, parents of children with developmental delays are more likely to say that their children have more frequent and more severe behaviour problems. The research also showed that although these behaviour problems impact the parents' stress levels, their behaviours can also create situations that affect the behaviour of their children. Thus, the researchers suggest that behavioural therapy and medicines that help lower child behaviour problems be used to help lower the stress levels of parents.

NOTE: The original [Research Report](#) was written by B. L. Baker and colleagues and was published in the Journal of Disability Research. 2003.