



Communicating Research in Clear Language

The Impact on their Families of Children with Special Needs

What is the research about?

Some people believe that children with disabilities have negative effects on family life. However, many parents report that their children with special needs bring benefits to their household. The authors of this paper were interested in finding out if having a positive outlook on life is either a way parents cope with stress, or is due to a deep change in the way they think about their child and their family.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers invited 1300 families of children with intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and/or cerebral palsy, to participate in this study. The 538 families that took part were asked about family financial hardship, the bonds within the family and how well they get along, the parents' feelings of stress, and how the child benefits the entire family.

What did the researchers find?

Overall, the majority of parents who took part in the survey reported that having a child with disabilities is a positive experience for their families, regardless of the child's impairment. The study did reveal that parent-reported benefits decrease as their stress increases. However, their stress was caused mainly by financial problems and lack of social support, not by the child's symptoms or behaviour. This showed that the parents' beliefs were not a way the families coped with stress. The parents found benefits in a greater sense of family togetherness and feelings of belonging to their community *because* they had a disabled child, not in spite of it.

Take home message

Parents of children with special needs probably do use benefit-finding as a way to cope with stress. It is also likely that major changes in their thinking, values, and beliefs about their child are the major reasons parents report family benefits. If this is true, then very different approaches to family support should be considered by policy makers and service providers in the future. It may be helpful to focus on helping parents strengthen their bond with their special needs children, and to help support them in the process of reflecting on their unique experiences. This will likely help them to transform their way of thinking. Policy makers may also start to focus on making child care and parental work hours more available and flexible for these families, to promote family well-being.

NOTE: The original [Research Report](#) was written by David McConnell and colleagues and was published in *Disability & Society*. 2014.