

Parents of Children With Disabilities Face More Daily Stress

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Raising a child with a disability can cause more daily stress and long-range health problems than parenting a child without disabilities, according to a new study that looked at a clinical measure of stress along with parents' survey responses.

“Our findings indicate the magnitude of the additional daily stress that these families face,” said lead author Marsha Mailick Seltzer, of the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin.

The study evaluated parents who have children living with disabilities that included attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, bipolar disorder and Down syndrome. It appears in the March issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

Researchers used data from the Midlife in the United States study, which included telephone interviews with 82 midlife parents (average age 57) of children with disabilities. Parents responded to items about their experiences in the past day concerning time use, daily stress, positive events and physical symptoms. Researchers compared these parents to a similar group of parents of children without disabilities.

They asked parents how often in the past 24 hours they had experienced daily stressors such as arguments, work stress and home stress.

Parents of children with disabilities had a greater number of stressors and a higher number of days during which they had at least one stressor.

They reported having at least one stressor on 50 percent of the study days compared with 40 percent among the other parents. Parents of children with disabilities also reported experiencing a greater number of physical health problems.

The researchers also evaluated saliva samples from the parents to measure the changing patterns of their cortisol expression during the day. Cortisol is a biological marker that plays an important role in linking stress exposure to health problems.

Daily cortisol patterns of parents of children with disabilities showed chronic strain that was much higher than normal on days when the parents spent more time with their children.

“The findings suggest that parents of children with disabilities would benefit from stress-reduction strategies,” Seltzer said. “There may be long-range health consequences of cortisol dysregulation, so it is important to moderate stress.”

“Parents of children with disabilities are in need of support,” said Patricia Wright, national director of autism services the Easter Seals. She said the organization “receives frequent requests regarding respite services, for instance. Respite is critical for family wellness; however, it is not an easy support for many families to access. Unfortunately, respite services are often unavailable due to lack of funding.”

More information: Mailick Seltzer M, et al. Psychosocial and biological markers of daily lives of midlife parents of children with disabilities. *J Health Soc Behav* 50(1), 2009.

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