ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Parenting Practices and Challenges of Parents of Children with Special Needs during COVID-19 in Pakistan: A Mixed Method Research

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The COVID-19 pandemic is continuing to affect people in numerous ways in Pakistan and across the world. The current study intended to observe stressors along with the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on parents of children with special needs. It also examined dynamics of screen time during COVID-19 lockdown

Study Design: Mixed-Method Sequential Explanatory Design was used.

Place and Duration of Study: The current study was conducted in various special education institutes of Lahore. The duration of data collection was two months.

Material and Methods: A scale on Parenting Response during COVID-19 (α=.75) was used.

Results: The current study highlighted various factors which added stress to the lives of parents of children with special needs during COVID-19. Findings indicate that lack of recreational activities was the major challenge for parents of children with special needs. Increased screen time for the child with special needs was also reported.

Conclusion: COVID-19 pandemic brough fear, uncertainty and stress all over the world. Parents who have children with special needs experienced increased stress due to lack of support, recreational and educational services. These findings call for the programs specifically designed for children with disabilities during crisis and support of their parents.

Key Words: *COVID-19, children with disabilities, parenting practices, parental mental health, stressors*

INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the COVID 19 pandemic, the world is not the same.[1] The lives of everyone have been directly or indirectly affected in innumerable ways. In this difficult time, it is important to highlight the fact that certain groups of people are more vulnerable than others when it comes to the consequences of this pandemic, children with disabilities and their families are one such group.[2] COVID-19 pandemic caused stress for parents and children in many ways as parents are dealing with

new challenges and children are struggling with their routines. These vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities and those with chronic health conditions have a higher chance of contracting severe COVID-19 disease and worse mental health outcomes such as increased anxiety, despair, loneliness and decrease sense of belonging.[3] Generally, children are considered safe and protected in their homes but researches suggest that in majority of cases of child abuse, perpetrators are the close family members. [4] Children are therefore considered at a greater risk of child abuse and neglect while they spend most of their time inside their homes under fear, stress, and uncertainty.[5] Children with disabilities become more vulnerable to child abuse and neglect because of the additional care and support required from their parents and caretakers. Children with disabilities faced major disadvantages with lack of regular interaction with the teachers and inaccessibility to the required therapeutic services resulting in an increased pressure for the caretakers of children with disabilities.[6]

1.1 The current study: In Pakistan just like everywhere in the world, COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost everyone; however, certain groups are adversely affected more than the others. Children with disabilities and their families are one such group. Children with disabilities find it more difficult to deviate from the routine than typically developing children, resulting in behavioral problems. Consequently, their parents are more prone to stress and other mental health issues. This may result in changed parenting practices. There is not much research conducted on this trend during the COVID-19 globally and especially in Pakistan, among families of children with disabilities.

The research questions for this study are:

- What factors have added stress to parents of children with disabilities during COVID-19 in Pakistan?
- Has COVID-19 lockdown changed parenting practices of parents of children with disabilities?
- Is there any difference in the screen time of the children with disabilities in pre and post lockdown period?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design: Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory design was used through conducting a survey and a focus group discussion. Data was collected in two phases; in the first phase a quantitative survey was carried out and in the second phase a focus group discussion was held. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches has been considered useful for more robust analysis and to integrate advantages of both approaches.[7]

2.2 Participants: The population of this study was parents of children with disabilities. This study was mainly focused on parents residing in Lahore. The city is divided into 9 zones and 1 cantonment area. Special education institutes providing services in different zones of cities were contacted and with their support sample of 52 parents of children with disabilities were recruited through purposive sampling. Among these participants 7 participants voluntarily agreed to participate in a focus group discussion. Sample characteristics have been described in table A1.

2.3 Instrumentation and validation: Parenting Response during COVID-19 scale was developed by the research team (see Appendix B). Reliability of the overall scale was calculated by using Cronbach's Alpha and its value was $\alpha = .75$, whereas $\alpha = .90$ for the subscale of parenting practices and $\alpha = .84$ for stressors. Higher scores in stressors indicate high stress level. Questions for focus group discussion were prepared after the quantitative analyses. Questions were based on the findings from quantitative surveys that needed further exploration.

2.4 Procedure: Data collection was very challenging due to COVID-19 pandemic. Several special education institutes in Lahore were contacted initially but due to pandemic each institute had its own constraints in granting permission for data collection. Institutes were then shortlisted, and their administration staff were contacted to finalize the logistics for recruitment of the participants and data collection. Participants were approached and given questionnaires with the help of management staff of the institutes (Appendix B). The average time to fill in each questionnaire was 10 minutes. The response rate

of the survey was nearly 50% as initially questionnaires were distributed to 100 parents but responses from 52 parents were received,

To further explore the quantitative findings, FGD was conducted with seven of the participants, selected from the sample of the first phase who volunteered to participate. This FGD was carried out in the Rising Sun Institute for Special Children, and its duration was 40 minutes.

2.5 Data Analysis: After data collection, data was entered, and data cleaning was done. Data was analyzed by using SPSS version 21.0. Descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation and Paired sample *t*-test were applied. Analysis of the focus group discussion was conducted by using thematic analysis method based on the transcript of the focus group discussion.

RESULTS

3.1 First phase (Quantitative Survey): Findings indicate that in most cases mothers are the responsible figure in taking care of the child with disabilities (75.0%) and helping him/her with their studies (73.1%). Findings also indicate that children mostly spent their time playing indoors (38.5%), doing schoolwork (32.7%) and watching cartoons/movies (30.8%) in the lockdown period of COVID-19 (Table A2).

Results indicate that before the lockdown period, many children (36.5%) used screens for less than 2 hours and only 13.5% used them for more than 6 hours whereas during lockdown the number of children watching screen for more than 6 hours daily rose to 42.3% and about 78.8% were `using the screens more than 2 hours per day (Table 1).

Table 1: Screen time of Children in Pre and Post Lockdown Period (N=52)

	Pre lockdown period	Post lockdown period
	N (%)	*N (%)*
Less than 2 hours	19(36.5)	11(21.2)
2 to 4 hours	13(25.0)	9(17.3)
4 to 6 hours	13(25.0)	10(19.2)
More than 6 hours	7(13.5)	22(42.3)

Lack of recreational activities during COVID-19 was highlighted as a most stressful indicator by the participants (90.2%), continuous reporting of COVID-19 by media came out as the second highest reported stressful indicators (reported by 86.4% of the respondents). Most of the participants (85.1%) also reported studies of children as stressful indicator 82.3% considered getting stuck indoors due to lockdown while 80.4% considered constant supervision of the children stressful, during lockdown.

Findings of paired sample *t*-test indicate significant differences in parenting practices; time spent with the child and screen time of the child in pre and post lockdown periods. Results show a statistically significant difference in the scores of parenting practices before and during COVID-19 lockdown (t =2.58, p=.013). Higher scores refer to positive parenting practices. Mean scores are higher (M=28.69, SD=4.42) for parenting practices before the lockdown than during lockdown (M=27.2, SD=5.83) showing more positive practices before than during COVID-19 lockdown. Findings also reflect that parents spent more time with children in the lockdown period (M=3.62, SD=.81) as compared to before lockdown (M=3.15, SD=.84). Furthermore, the results indicate that screen time of the child increased during the lockdown period (*M=2.77, SD=1.18*) as compared to before lockdown (*M=2.19, SD=1.05*) see Table 2

3.2 Results Phase 2 (Focus Group Discussion)

Challenges for the Parents with respect to their Child with Disabilities

Parents of children with disabilities discussed various challenges. One mother reported Meri beti ny school sy seekha tha sab sy hath milana but corona ki waja sy jab us se haath nae milaya jata tha tou wo pareshan hojati thi k mjh sy sab hath keon nae mila rehy. [My daughter learned hand shaking in school. Due to COVID-19, when it was recommended not to shake hands, my daughter used to get worried about why no one was shaking hands with her. Most of the parents shared that the first lockdown due to COVID-19 brought terror with it, mainly because no one was prepared for it, however in the second lockdown things were a bit manageable because parents were ready for what they were going to face.

Table 2: ***Comparison of Parenting Practices, Time spent with the Child and Screen time of the Child in Pre and Post COVID-19 Lockdown Period (N=52)***

Variable	Before lockdown		During lockdown				95% CI		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*	Cohen's *d*
Parenting practices	28.69	4.42	27.2	5.83	2.58	.013*	.3	2.58	0.23
Time Spent with the Child	3.15	.84	3.62	.81	-3.60	.001*	-.73	-.21	0.57
Screen time of the child	2.19	1.05	2.77	1.18	-4.924	.000***	-.81	-.34	0.52

Lack of Routine: Parents emphasized that the main issue during lockdown was maintaining a routine. It was very difficult to carry out activities with children at home and thus it resulted in aggression and behavioral issues in their children.

Mental Health of the Parents: Parents expressed that due to COVID-19 their mental health was affected, they were anxious and stressed out due to the situation. One participant expressed her situation as Mjhy palpitations hoti theen raat mai or sleep disturbance rehti thi. Mujhe yh khof rehta tha k agar mjhy kuch ho gaya to mere bache (child with disabilities) ko kon sambhaly ga, apny sary bachon mai sy mjy iski fiker rhti thi.[I used to have palpitations and sleep disturbances at night. I was worried that if something happens to me in COVID-19 situation then who will take care of my child with disabilities? I used to get worried about him (child with disabilities) among all my children.

DISCUSSION

COVID-19 affected lives in numerous ways. Findings from the current study reflect that children mostly spent their time playing indoors, doing schoolwork and watching cartoons/movies in the lockdown period of COVID-19. Our findings from the focus group further revealed that there was a lack of routine in children's activities that resulted in increased behavioral problems in children. Cusinato et al.[8] reported that measures taken for confinement due to COVID-19 and change in the routine of children and parents negatively affected parents' mental health which resulted in risk for well-being of children.Participants in the current study perceived that screen time is increased in their household during the lockdown of COVID-19. Findings indicate that there was a statistically significant difference in the screen time of the child in pre and post COVID-19 lockdown period. According to the findings of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry[9, 10] most of the children found to be spending more hours on screens during COVID-19 lockdown than recommended screen time for their age. This study shows that in our population the screen time was already more than recommended in most children before lockdown, and it increased even more during the COVID-19 lockdown. Lack of recreational opportunities during COVID-19 was highly reported as a stressful indicator whereas continuous reporting on the media of on COVID-19 situation and uncertain situation came out as the second highest reported stressful indicators. However, the findings of the focus group discussion revealed that the lives of children with disabilities and their families were affected in many other ways as well.Findings of the current study indicate significant positive correlation of stressors such as: distribution of time among chores, need to go out, lack of house help, inability to teach child properly, unavailability of outside food, economic burden, constant supervision of children,

unavailability of desired products, lack of recreational activities and uncertainty of the situation with poor mental health reflecting that increase in the relevance with these stressors lead to increase in poor mental health of parents of children with disabilities. Similarly, Alhuzimi[11] reported in the study on emotional well-being and stress of parents due to COVID-19, that parental stress has a negative impact on the well-being of the parents of the children with autism spectrum disorder. Several other studies, [12,13,14] also reported findings of elevated stress levels in parents during COVID-19 and resulting in poor mental healthConger et al.[15] suggested that environmental stressors result in negative parenting practices. Similarly, Evans et al.[16] reported that COVID-19 pandemic has adverse effects on the relationship of parents with their children. Findings of the current study also strengthens this notion, as results indicate that although parents spent more time with their children during lockdown than before lockdown period, there was a decline in positive parenting practices during COVID-19 lockdown than before lockdown. Findings from focus group discussion also highlighted that parents felt they were spending less quality time with their children despite having more time. They reported that it was very difficult to engage them in healthy activities along with managing all household work which resulted in frustration and decline in the quality of parenting. They also highlighted that there were so many online programs for typically developing children during this pandemic but there was a lack of targeted educational and recreational programs for children with disabilities. To ensure that no one is left behind in the pandemic, policies and interventions need to focus on inclusion of children with disabilities.[17]

COVID-19 pandemic brought fear, uncertainty and stress and isolation all over the world. Initially the world was more concerned with its clinical aspects, gradually psychological outcomes of this pandemic have caught the attention of the experts and researchers. Children were not at the face of this pandemic but affected greatly due to school closures, confinement and isolation. These effects become more detrimental when we talk about children with disabilities. The current study highlighted various factors adding stress to the lives of parents of children with disabilities. Findings indicate that the lack of recreational activities has been a major challenge for parents of children with disabilities. Increased screen time of the child and overall household was reported. Parents also expressed concerns for their child with disabilities and mental health issues due to COVID-19 pandemic. Although parents spent more time with children due to caretaking demands and other household duties, the quality of the relationship declined as parents reflected more negative parenting practices during lockdown than before lockdown. Parents reported lack of support services and recreational and educational facilities during lockdown and school closures for children having disabilities. These findings call for programs specifically designed for children with disabilities during crisis and support of their parents.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 pandemic brought fear, uncertainty and stress and isolation all over the world. Initially the world was more concerned with its clinical aspects, gradually psychological outcomes of this pandemic have caught the attention of the experts and researchers. Children were not at the face of this pandemic but affected greatly due to school closures, confinement and isolation. These effects become more detrimental when we talk about children with disabilities. The current study highlighted various factors adding stress to the lives of parents of children with disabilities. Findings indicate that the lack of recreational activities has been a major challenge for parents of children with disabilities. Increased screen time of the child and overall household was reported. Parents also expressed concerns for their child with disabilities and mental health issues due to COVID-19 pandemic. Although parents spent more time with children due to caretaking demands and other household duties, the quality of the relationship declined as parents reflected more negative parenting practices during lockdown than before lockdown. Parents reported lack of support services and recreational and educational facilities during lockdown and school closures for children having disabilities. These findings call for programs specifically designed for children with disabilities during crisis and support of their parents.

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Author's Contribution

NZ: Contributed in study design and throughout the process of this study**.**
MN: Contributed in study design, scale construction and manuscript writing.
AZ: Contributed in methodology, data analysis and manuscript writing
NC: Contributed in study design, data collection and Manuscript writing

All the authors have approved the final manuscript draft and accept the responsibility of research integrity.