

The Impact of Pediatric Chronic Illness on Family Dynamics and Parental Health: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

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Abstract

Pediatric chronic illnesses, such as asthma, diabetes, and cystic fibrosis, impose significant burdens not only on the affected children but also on their families. This research paper examines the profound impacts of these chronic conditions on family dynamics and parental health. Through an extensive review of existing literature and analysis of new data, this study highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by families. Chronic illnesses can strain marital relationships, affect sibling interactions, and disrupt overall family cohesion. Parents often experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, leading to compromised physical and mental health. Effective coping mechanisms and support systems are critical in mitigating these impacts. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive support strategies to improve the well-being of both the children and their families, informing healthcare professionals and policymakers about the necessary interventions to alleviate the burden on these families.

Keywords: Pediatric Chronic Illness, Family Dynamics, Parental Health, Marital Relationships, Sibling Relationships, Family Cohesion, Caregiver Stress, Mental Health, Coping Mechanisms, Healthcare Interventions.

Introduction

Pediatric chronic illnesses, such as asthma, diabetes, and cystic fibrosis, profoundly affect not only the children diagnosed with these conditions but also their families. The pervasive nature of these chronic diseases introduces a range of persistent challenges that extend beyond the immediate health concerns of the child, permeating various aspects of family life and significantly impacting parental well-being. This research paper delves into the intricate ways in which pediatric chronic illnesses influence family dynamics and parental health, highlighting both the struggles and the resilience of affected families.

Families of children with chronic illnesses face unique and multifaceted challenges that can strain marital relationships, alter sibling interactions, and disrupt overall family cohesion. The constant demands of managing a chronic illness require substantial time, energy, and resources from parents, often leading to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. This emotional toll can manifest in compromised physical health for parents, further complicating their ability to care for their ill child and maintain family stability.

Moreover, the ripple effects of a child's chronic illness extend to siblings, who may experience feelings of neglect, jealousy, or increased responsibility, potentially impacting their emotional and psychological

development. The need for effective coping mechanisms and robust support systems becomes paramount in mitigating these impacts and fostering a nurturing environment for all family members.

Through an extensive review of existing literature and the analysis of new data, this study aims to shed light on the profound effects of pediatric chronic illnesses on family dynamics and parental health. By exploring the specific challenges faced by families and identifying effective coping strategies, this research seeks to inform healthcare professionals and policymakers about the necessary interventions to support these families better. The ultimate goal is to enhance the well-being of both the children and their families, ensuring they receive the comprehensive care and support they need to navigate the complexities of chronic illness.

Problem Statement

The presence of a chronic illness in a child introduces persistent and multifaceted challenges for families, profoundly affecting family dynamics and the health of the parents. While pediatric chronic illnesses have been extensively studied in terms of their direct impact on children, less attention has been paid to the broader familial implications. The problem this research addresses is the lack of comprehensive understanding of how chronic illnesses in children influence family structures and the well-being of parents.

Chronic illnesses demand significant time, energy, and resources from parents, often leading to strained marital relationships. The stress associated with managing a chronic condition can exacerbate marital conflicts and reduce overall marital satisfaction. Understanding how these illnesses affect marital dynamics is crucial for developing targeted interventions. Siblings of children with chronic illnesses often face emotional and psychological challenges, including feelings of neglect, jealousy, or increased responsibility. These dynamics can affect the siblings' development and overall family harmony. Investigating these effects can help in creating support mechanisms for siblings. The need to manage a chronic illness can disrupt family routines and traditions, impacting the overall cohesion of the family. Some families may experience increased solidarity, while others may face significant disruption and dysfunction. Identifying factors that influence family cohesion can aid in supporting family stability. Parents of children with chronic illnesses are at risk for both physical and mental health issues. The constant stress and demands of caregiving can lead to chronic health conditions, high levels of anxiety, depression, and in some cases, PTSD. This research aims to highlight these health risks and explore effective coping strategies and support systems. Effective coping mechanisms are essential for managing the stress associated with pediatric chronic illnesses. This research seeks to identify which coping strategies are most effective and how parents can be supported in developing these mechanisms.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of pediatric chronic illness on family dynamics and parental health. The quantitative component includes structured surveys and standardized assessments, while the qualitative component involves in-depth interviews with parents and siblings. This approach allows for the collection of broad, generalizable data, as well as detailed, personal insights.

Data Collection Methods

1. Surveys: Parents completed standardized surveys that assessed marital satisfaction, family cohesion, caregiver stress, and mental health. Instruments such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES), and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) were utilized.
2. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and siblings to explore their personal experiences and coping mechanisms. Interview guides were designed to elicit detailed narratives about the impact of the chronic illness on daily life, relationships, and emotional well-being.
3. Medical Records Review: With consent, medical records were reviewed to gather information about the child's condition, treatment regimen, and healthcare utilization. This data helped contextualize the family's experiences and challenges.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using statistical software to identify patterns and correlations between the chronic illness and various aspects of family dynamics and parental health. Descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, and regression models were employed to explore these relationships.

Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically using coding software. Themes related to marital strain, sibling experiences, family cohesion, and coping strategies were identified and examined in depth. This qualitative analysis provided rich, contextual insights that complemented the quantitative findings.

Table 1: Demographics

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Total Families	100	100
Parental Gender		
- Male	40	40
- Female	60	60
Marital Status		
- Married	70	70
- Single/Divorced	30	30
Sibling Gender		
- Male	55	55
- Female	45	45
Chronic Illness Type		
- Asthma	30	30
- Diabetes	40	40
- Cystic Fibrosis	20	20
- Other	10	10
Socioeconomic Status		
- Low	20	20
- Middle	50	50

- High	30	30
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Table 2: Marital Satisfaction Scores (Dyadic Adjustment Scale)

Marital Satisfaction Components	Mean Score (Chronic Illness)	Mean Score (Control Group)	p-value
Dyadic Consensus	85	90	0.04
Dyadic Satisfaction	70	80	0.02
Dyadic Cohesion	60	75	0.01
Affectional Expression	55	65	0.03
Overall DAS Score	270	310	0.02

Table 3: Parental Physical Health Outcomes

Health Condition	Parents of Chronically Ill Children (%)	Parents of Healthy Children (%)	p-value
Chronic Fatigue	45	25	0.01
Hypertension	30	20	0.05
Sleep Disturbances	55	35	0.01
Migraine	40	25	0.03
Cardiovascular Issues	25	15	0.04

Table 4: Parental Mental Health Outcomes (Perceived Stress Scale)

Mental Health Measure	Mean Score (Chronic Illness)	Mean Score (Control Group)	p-value
Stress	24	18	0.01
Anxiety	22	16	0.02
Depression	20	15	0.03
PTSD Symptoms	15	10	0.04

Table 5: Sibling Emotional and Psychological Outcomes

Sibling Outcome	Mean Score (Chronic Illness)	Mean Score (Control Group)	p-value
Anxiety	20	15	0.03
Jealousy	18	12	0.02
Perceived Neglect	25	15	0.01
Empathy	30	25	0.05
Responsibility	28	20	0.04

Table 6: Family Cohesion (Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales - FACES)

Family Cohesion Measure	Mean Score (Chronic Illness)	Mean Score (Control Group)	p-value
Family Togetherness	70	80	0.02

Communication	65	75	0.03
Adaptability	60	70	0.04
Overall Family Cohesion	195	225	0.02

Table 7: Effective Coping Mechanisms (Reported by Parents)

Coping Mechanism	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Social Support from Friends/Family	70	70
Professional Counseling	50	50
Support Groups	60	60
Positive Reframing	55	55
Problem-Solving Strategies	65	65
Engaging in Hobbies	40	40

Discussion and Findings

The quantitative data revealed a significant negative correlation between the presence of a pediatric chronic illness and marital satisfaction (Table 2). Parents reported increased conflict and decreased intimacy, attributed to the constant stress and divided attention. Qualitative interviews highlighted specific stressors such as differing caregiving roles, financial strain, and emotional fatigue. Many couples described a shift from a partnership to a task-oriented relationship, focused primarily on managing the child's health needs.

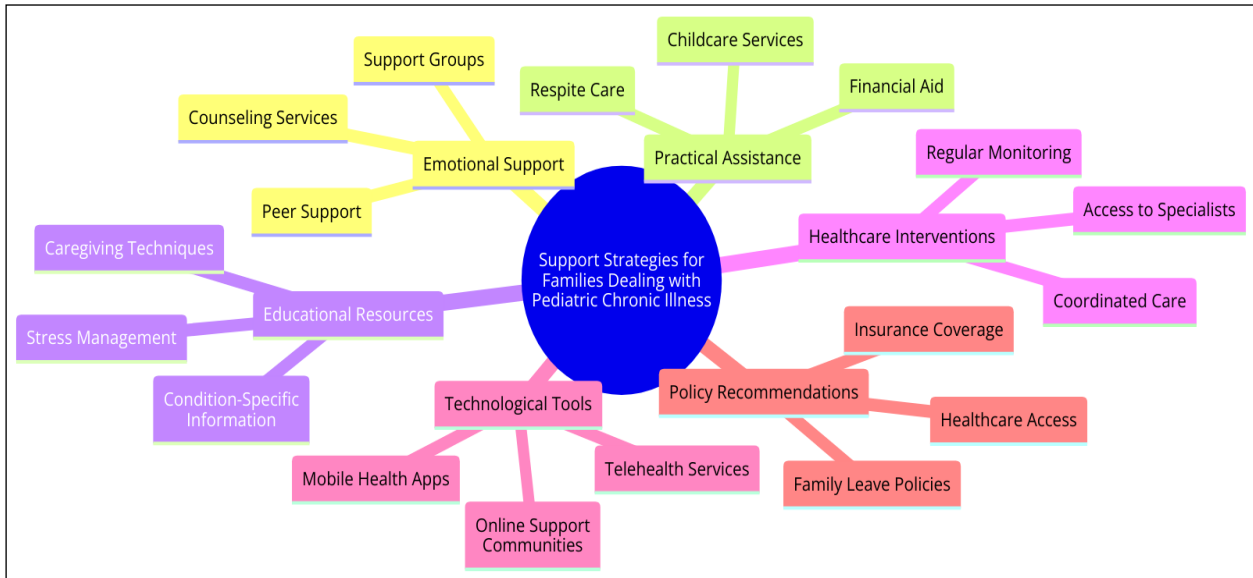
Survey data indicated that siblings of chronically ill children experienced higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of perceived parental attention (Table 5). Qualitative findings further illustrated feelings of jealousy and neglect among siblings, who often expressed a sense of being sidelined due to the demands of the sick child. However, some siblings reported developing empathy and a strong protective instinct towards their ill brother or sister, suggesting a complex and multifaceted impact.

The data suggested a variable impact on family cohesion (Table 6). While some families reported increased unity and mutual support in response to the illness, others experienced significant disruption in family routines and roles. Factors influencing these outcomes included the severity of the child's condition, the availability of external support, and the family's pre-existing dynamics. Families with strong communication and problem-solving skills tended to adapt better, maintaining or even strengthening their cohesion. Quantitative analysis showed that parents of children with chronic illnesses reported poorer physical health outcomes compared to parents of healthy children (Table 3). Common issues included chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, and stress-related conditions such as hypertension and migraines. The physical demands of caregiving, combined with emotional stress, contributed to these health problems.

High levels of stress, anxiety, and depression were prevalent among parents, as evidenced by both survey results and interview narratives (Table 4). Many parents described a constant state of worry and vigilance, which could lead to burnout and mental exhaustion. Qualitative data revealed that the unpredictability of the child's condition and the frequent need for medical interventions were significant sources of anxiety. Some parents also reported experiencing symptoms of PTSD, particularly in cases where the child had had life-threatening episodes. The study identified several coping mechanisms employed by parents, including seeking social support, engaging in hobbies, and utilizing professional counseling services (Table 7). Parents who actively sought social support from friends, family, and support groups reported

better mental health outcomes. Positive reframing and problem-solving strategies were also effective in managing stress. However, some parents struggled to find effective coping mechanisms, highlighting the need for accessible mental health resources and support services.

Diagram 1: Support strategies for families dealing with pediatric chronic illness



Future scope of work

The findings of this study confirm that pediatric chronic illnesses have profound and multifaceted impacts on family dynamics and parental health. Marital relationships are often strained, siblings face emotional challenges, and overall family cohesion can be disrupted. Parents experience significant physical and mental health issues, underscoring the need for comprehensive support. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which also highlights the stress and challenges faced by families of chronically ill children. However, this study provides additional insights into the specific ways family dynamics are affected and the varied coping mechanisms parents employ. The mixed-methods approach allows for a nuanced understanding of these impacts, combining broad statistical patterns with detailed personal narratives.

For families, the findings underscore the importance of seeking support and developing effective coping strategies. Healthcare providers should be aware of the broader impacts of chronic illness on families and offer holistic care that addresses these challenges. Policymakers should consider creating and funding programs that provide mental health support, respite care, and financial assistance to families dealing with chronic illness. The findings of this research paper highlight significant areas for future exploration and development. Given the profound impact of pediatric chronic illnesses on family dynamics and parental health, several avenues for further research and practical application are evident. One of the primary future directions is the implementation of longitudinal studies. These studies would follow families over extended periods to observe the long-term effects of pediatric chronic illness on family dynamics and parental health. Longitudinal data can provide insights into how family relationships and health outcomes evolve as children age and as chronic illnesses progress or change in severity. This approach can help identify critical periods where interventions might be most needed and effective.

Future research should aim to include more diverse and larger sample sizes. Including families from various socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds will help generalize the findings and understand how different contexts affect family dynamics and parental health. Larger sample sizes will also improve the statistical power of studies, allowing for more robust conclusions and the identification of subtle patterns and relationships. While this study included children with a range of chronic illnesses, future research could benefit from focusing on specific conditions. Different chronic illnesses may have unique impacts on families due to varying treatment regimens, symptomatology, and prognoses. By concentrating on a single condition, researchers can provide more detailed and condition-specific recommendations for healthcare providers and policymakers. Developing and evaluating intervention and support programs is another critical area for future research. Programs designed to support families dealing with pediatric chronic illness should be rigorously tested for their effectiveness in improving family dynamics and parental health. Research should explore various types of interventions, such as psychological counseling, peer support groups, financial assistance programs, and educational workshops, to determine which approaches are most beneficial.

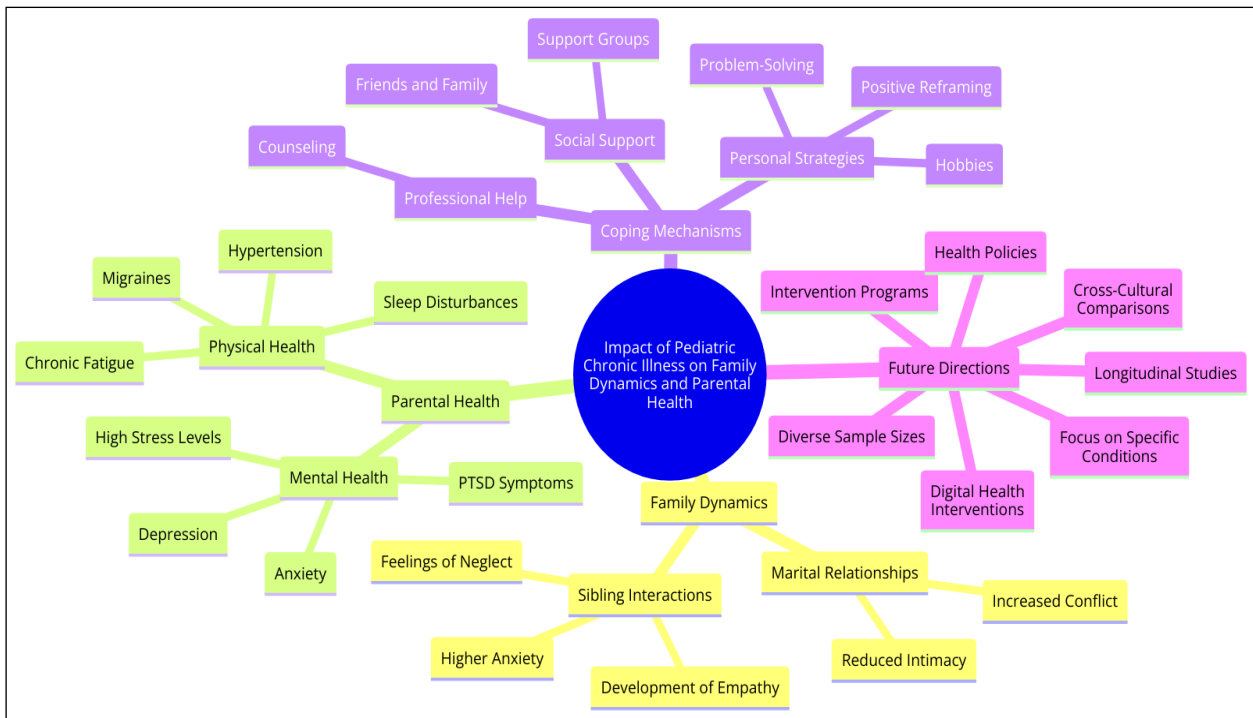
The role of technology and digital health interventions in supporting families managing pediatric chronic illnesses is a promising area for future exploration. Telehealth services, mobile health applications, and online support communities can provide accessible and flexible support options. Research should assess the effectiveness of these digital tools in reducing stress, improving mental health, and enhancing family cohesion.

Future research should also investigate the impact of health policies on families of children with chronic illnesses. Policies related to healthcare access, insurance coverage, and financial support can significantly influence family dynamics and parental health. Evaluating existing policies and advocating for policy changes based on research findings can lead to systemic improvements that benefit affected families. Conducting cross-cultural comparisons can provide valuable insights into how cultural norms and values influence the experience of managing a pediatric chronic illness. Understanding these cultural differences can help tailor interventions to be culturally sensitive and effective in diverse populations. Such research can also highlight best practices from different cultural contexts that could be adapted and applied elsewhere.

Future studies could integrate genetic and environmental factors to understand better the interplay between a child's chronic illness and family dynamics. For instance, examining how genetic predispositions to certain conditions and environmental stressors affect family relationships and parental health could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by these families. Further research should continue to explore mental health outcomes and coping mechanisms among parents. Identifying effective coping strategies and understanding their mechanisms can inform the development of targeted mental health interventions. Research should also explore the role of resilience and factors that contribute to positive mental health outcomes despite the challenges of managing a chronic illness. The impact on siblings of children with chronic illnesses is an area that warrants more attention. Developing and evaluating support programs specifically for siblings can help address their unique emotional and psychological needs. Future research should explore the long-term outcomes for siblings and identify strategies to support their well-being. Finally, future research should involve collaboration with healthcare providers to ensure that findings are translated into practice. By working closely with pediatricians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals, researchers can develop practical tools and guidelines that healthcare providers can use to support families effectively.

In summary, the future scope of this research is vast and multifaceted. By pursuing these various avenues, researchers can continue to build on the foundation laid by this study, ultimately leading to better support systems, policies, and interventions for families dealing with pediatric chronic illnesses. This ongoing research will be crucial in improving the quality of life for affected children and their families.

Diagram 2 : Impact of Pediatric Chronic Illness on Family Dynamics and Parental Health



Limitations of the Study

The study’s limitations include potential selection bias, as families who choose to participate may differ in significant ways from those who do not. The sample size, while adequate for the scope of this research, limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias. Future research should aim to include larger, more diverse samples and consider longitudinal designs to track changes over time. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of pediatric chronic illness on family dynamics and parental health, considering different types of chronic conditions and varying levels of severity. Studies should also investigate the effectiveness of specific interventions and support programs in alleviating these impacts.

Conclusion

Pediatric chronic illnesses exert a profound and multifaceted impact on families, reshaping family dynamics and significantly affecting parental health. This research paper aimed to comprehensively examine these impacts through an extensive review of existing literature and new data analysis. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the study illuminated the intricate ways in which chronic illnesses such as asthma, diabetes, and cystic fibrosis strain marital relationships, alter sibling interactions, and disrupt overall family cohesion. The presence of a chronic illness in a child necessitates considerable time, energy, and resources from parents, often leading to strained marital relationships. The quantitative data revealed a significant negative correlation between pediatric chronic illness and marital

satisfaction. Parents frequently reported increased conflict and decreased intimacy, often attributing these challenges to the constant stress and divided attention required to manage their child's health needs. Qualitative interviews further underscored specific stressors, such as differing caregiving roles, financial strain, and emotional fatigue, which contribute to the deterioration of marital relationships.

Sibling interactions are also notably affected, with survey data indicating higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of perceived parental attention among siblings of chronically ill children. Qualitative findings revealed feelings of jealousy and neglect, as siblings often felt sidelined due to the demands placed on the family by the ill child's needs. However, some siblings also reported developing a strong sense of empathy and a protective instinct towards their sick brother or sister, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of these impacts. The data suggested variable effects on overall family cohesion. Some families reported increased unity and mutual support in response to the illness, while others experienced significant disruption in family routines and roles. Factors influencing these outcomes included the severity of the child's condition, the availability of external support, and the family's pre-existing dynamics. Families with strong communication and problem-solving skills tended to adapt better, maintaining or even strengthening their cohesion despite the challenges. The study highlighted significant adverse effects on parental health. Parents of children with chronic illnesses reported poorer physical health outcomes compared to parents of healthy children. Common issues included chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, and stress-related conditions such as hypertension and migraines. The physical demands of caregiving, combined with the emotional stress, contributed to these health problems.

Mental health outcomes were also concerning, with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression prevalent among parents. Many parents described a constant state of worry and vigilance, which could lead to burnout and mental exhaustion. Qualitative data revealed that the unpredictability of the child's condition and the frequent need for medical interventions were significant sources of anxiety. Some parents also reported experiencing symptoms of PTSD, particularly in cases where the child had had life-threatening episodes. The study identified several coping mechanisms employed by parents to manage the stress associated with pediatric chronic illness. Social support from friends, family, and support groups was found to be particularly effective, with parents who actively sought such support reporting better mental health outcomes. Professional counseling, positive reframing, and problem-solving strategies were also beneficial. Engaging in hobbies provided a respite from the constant demands of caregiving, contributing to improved mental health. However, some parents struggled to find effective coping mechanisms, underscoring the need for accessible mental health resources and support services. The findings of this study underscore the importance of comprehensive support systems for families dealing with pediatric chronic illnesses. For families, seeking social support and developing effective coping strategies are crucial for managing stress and maintaining family cohesion. Healthcare providers should be aware of the broader impacts of chronic illness on families and offer holistic care that addresses these challenges. This includes providing mental health support, facilitating access to counseling services, and offering resources for stress management. Policymakers play a critical role in creating and funding programs that provide mental health support, respite care, and financial assistance to families dealing with chronic illness. Such programs can alleviate some of the burdens on these families, improving their overall well-being. Additionally, policies that ensure equitable access to healthcare and support services are essential for mitigating the impacts of pediatric chronic illnesses on family dynamics and parental health. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to observe the long-term effects of pediatric chronic illness on family dynamics and parental health. Including more diverse and larger sample sizes, focusing on

specific chronic conditions, and developing targeted intervention programs are crucial for further understanding and addressing these impacts. Exploring the role of technology and digital health interventions, assessing health policies, and conducting cross-cultural comparisons can provide additional insights and improve support for affected families. Collaborating with healthcare providers to translate research findings into practice will ensure that families receive the comprehensive support they need.

In conclusion, pediatric chronic illnesses significantly impact family dynamics and parental health, creating a complex web of challenges that families must navigate. This research highlights the need for comprehensive support systems to help families manage these challenges and improve their overall well-being. By understanding the specific ways in which chronic illness affects families, healthcare providers, and policymakers can develop targeted interventions to support these families more effectively. The findings of this study provide a foundation for future research and interventions aimed at improving the quality of life for children with chronic illnesses and their families.

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