

Parenting Stress of Challenged and Non-Challenged Children: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines parenting stress among parents of challenged and non-challenged children, focusing on dimensions i.e. financial, social, family, and emotional stress. Conducted in Hooghly; Paschim Medinipur; and Kolkata, West Bengal, India, the study involved 200 parents (100 of challenged children and 100 of non-challenged children) across diverse occupations using a survey-based cross-sectional design through conveniently. Findings reveal significant gender and occupational differences in stress levels. Fathers of non-challenged children report higher financial stress, while mothers of challenged children experience greater social stress. Occupational factors influence stress differently across groups; for instance, service professionals report higher family stress among parents of non-challenged children, while farmers of challenged children report the least social stress. Age-related analyses suggest that while financial stress decreases with parenting age in non-challenged groups, emotional and overall stress increase in parents of challenged children as they age. This comparison underscores the specific stressors unique to each parenting context, offering insights into potential areas for support and intervention. The study contributes to understanding how child developmental status, gender, occupation, and age intersect to shape parental stress, thereby informing tailored approaches for alleviating stress and promoting family well-being in varied caregiving contexts.

Keywords: Parenting Stress, Challenged and Non-Challenged Children, Comparative Perspective

Introduction

Parenting stress refers to the heightened anxiety and tension experienced in the parenting role, particularly in parent-child interactions (Abidin, 1995). It arises when the demands of parenting surpass the resources available to parents, making it challenging for them to meet these demands effectively. While all parents experience stress to some extent, those raising children with developmental disabilities often face significantly greater challenges. Globally, over one billion people live with disabilities, representing 10-12% of the population (WHO; UN, World Bank). In India, the prevalence of disability is estimated at 25%, higher than the global average and neighboring countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This context amplifies the stress for parents of children with disabilities, as they must manage additional caregiving responsibilities. Parenting itself is a significant life transition (Pittman, Wright, & Lloyd, 1989), and when parents learn that their child has a disability, it often triggers severe emotional distress. This emotional burden, characterized by feelings of denial, anger, and fear, affects the whole family. Many parents struggle

with feelings of inadequacy, often perceiving their child's condition as a reflection of their own failings. Consequently, parents of children with disabilities frequently report higher levels of stress and lower well-being compared to those with typically developing children (Oelofson & Richardson, 2006; Bundy & Kuncie, 2009). The demands of caring for a child with a disability can lead to social isolation, particularly when the child's limited mobility or behavioral challenges restrict family activities (McCubbin et al., 1982). The additional stress of managing behavioral problems, alongside financial and logistical demands like medical care and specialized education, compounds the pressure on these parents. Parental stress is closely tied to the dynamics of the parent-child relationship. Managing daily tasks and addressing behavioral challenges becomes particularly difficult with a child who has special needs. The constant demands of caring for a child with disabilities often lead to elevated stress levels (Tew & Laurence, 1975), especially when these children require extra attention in physical, social, and psychological areas (Senel & Akkok, 1996). Families with fewer socio-economic resources face even greater difficulties, as limited support increases their stress (Sameroff et al., 1987). In cases of girls with intellectual disabilities, there is also a heightened risk of neglect and abuse (Loeb, 1979). While the stress of parenting is more pronounced for parents of children with disabilities, it affects all families. Studies show that parents of typically developing children also experience stress related to parenting, particularly due to ongoing family conflicts and role strains (Lavee et al., 1996). Understanding the differences and similarities in stress among these groups is essential for creating effective interventions that support parents in both situations.

Rationale of the study

Parenting is an inherently complex and stressful process, made even more demanding when a child faces developmental challenges. The concept of disability, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2001), recognizes that disability is not only a medical condition but also a contextual and dynamic variable that is shaped by societal norms and resources. In some cultures, disability is viewed through a medical model, which sees the condition as abnormal and seeks to "fix" the individual (Amundson, 2000). In others, particularly agrarian societies, individuals with disabilities may be well integrated, or even seen as possessing extraordinary abilities (Priestley, 1999; Foucault, 1997). This wide variation in societal response to disability highlights the complex intersection of culture, disability, and stress for parents. Research has consistently demonstrated that parents of challenged children experience higher levels of stress compared to those of non-challenged children (Oelofson & Richardson, 2006; Bundy & Kuncie, 2009). This stress is not only emotional but also practical, with parents facing numerous challenges, such as financial strain, behavioral difficulties, and social isolation (McCubbin et al., 1982; Senel & Akkok, 1996). In contrast, parents of non-challenged children, while still experiencing stress, often face different stressors that stem more from general parenting roles and situational challenges (Lavee et al., 1996). Parenting stress has been linked to various negative outcomes, including diminished parental well-being, strained marital relationships, and increased potential for negative child outcomes (Creasy & Jarvis, 1994; Rodriguez & Murphy, 1997). In families with challenged children, the chronic nature of disability increases caregiving demands, which amplifies stress and affects the parents' ability to manage daily tasks, contributing to further emotional and psychological burden (Tew & Laurence, 1975). These stresses can also hinder the child's development and exacerbate behavioral problems, creating a reciprocal cycle of stress for both the parents and the child. In contrast, while parents of non-challenged children experience parenting stress, the literature suggests that the levels of stress may be lower and less associated with child-specific challenges. Studies have shown that these parents report lower levels of stress related to child

characteristics, such as behavioral issues or developmental delays, compared to parents of challenged children (Baker & McCal, 1995; Cameron et al., 1991). However, parents of non-challenged children still face stress related to the general demands of parenting, including balancing family roles, managing intra-family problems, and coping with normative life events like the empty nest syndrome or financial strains (Lavee et al., 1996). Given these differences, a comparative study of parenting stress between parents of challenged and non-challenged children is essential. It allows for a deeper understanding of the specific stressors that affect each group, as well as the contextual and demographic factors that might mitigate or exacerbate stress. By examining both groups, we can develop more targeted interventions that address the unique needs of parents based on their child's abilities and family circumstances. This approach will not only provide insights into the psychological and social impact of parenting but also highlight the need for comprehensive support systems for parents of both challenged and non-challenged children.

Thus, this study aims to explore the comparative dimensions of parenting stress among these two groups, focusing on the unique stressors, coping mechanisms, and outcomes associated with each. This comparative perspective will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges parents face and provide valuable information for policymakers, educators, and healthcare providers to design interventions that alleviate stress and promote family well-being.

Objectives

1. To study the stress of parents (Financial Stress, Social Stress, family Stress, and Emotional Stress) of challenged and non-challenged children based on gender.
2. To study the stress of parents (Financial Stress, Social Stress, family Stress, and Emotional Stress) of challenged and non-challenged children based on occupation.
3. To study the relationship between stress of parents (Financial Stress, Social Stress, family Stress, and Emotional Stress) and parenting age of challenged and non-challenged children.

Hypotheses

H₀₁: There would be no significant mean difference on stress of parents (Financial Stress, Social Stress, family Stress, and Emotional Stress) of challenged and non-challenged children with regard to gender.

H₀₂: There would be no significant mean difference on stress of parents (Financial Stress, Social Stress, family Stress, and Emotional Stress) of challenged and non-challenged children with regard to occupation.

H₀₃: There would be no significant relationship between stress of parents (Financial Stress, Social Stress, family Stress, and Emotional Stress) and parenting age of challenged and non-challenged children.

Methodology

The participants for this study were parents of both non-challenged and challenged children, all residing in the districts of Hooghly (74), Paschim Medinipur (76), and Kolkata (50) in West Bengal. The sample consisted of 100 parents (50 fathers and 50 mothers) of non-Challenged children and 100 parents (50 fathers and 50 mothers) of challenged children selected conveniently. These parents came from rural and urban areas. The study used a cross-sectional method with survey design chosen to capture the current state of parenting stress in these families. This method allowed the researcher to identify the problem in its real-world context. To collect data on parenting stress scale (PSS), which developed by Havalappanavar (2001), was utilized. This scale consists of 24 items divided into four dimensions, each containing six items: (i) Financial Stress, (ii) Social Stress (outside the family), (iii) Social Stress/Family Stress (within

the family), and (iv) Emotional Stress. Each item is rated using a 4-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "No Stress" (0 points) to "Severe Stress" (3 points). The validity of the scale was confirmed through content validity techniques, while its reliability was assessed using the test-retest method, yielding a reliability score of 0.85. The maximum possible score on the scale is 72, and the minimum is 0, with the overall stress score reflecting the total from all four dimensions i.e. Financial Stress; Social Stress; Family Stress; and Emotional Stress. Each dimension highlights the various facets of stress experienced by parents, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of family stress in different contexts. Data analysed through SPSS 21 and statistical operation were mean, standard deviation, t test, ANOVA, and Pearson correlation.

Results

Table 1: Showing mean difference on stress of parents (Financial Stress, Social Stress, family Stress, and Emotional Stress) of challenged and non-challenged children with regard to gender.

	Variables	Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	t-test	Sig (2 tailed)	
Non-Challenged	Financial	Male	50	9.08	3.269	98	3.124	.002	
		Female	50	7.56	1.072				
	Social	Male	50	10.62	3.206	98	-.579	.564	
		Female	50	10.96	2.642				
	Family	Male	50	7.22	3.765	98	-.975	.332	
		Female	50	7.92	3.404				
	Emotional	Male	50	10.74	2.702	98	-.157	.876	
		Female	50	10.82	2.396				
	Stress of Parents	Male	50	4.32	2.436	98	-.360	.719	
		Female	50	4.14	1.796				
	Challenged	Financial	Male	50	2.26	1.904	98	.421	.675
			Female	50	2.92	1.122			
Social		Male	50	2.06	1.834	98	-2.112	.037	
		Female	50	2.68	1.347				
Family		Male	50	4.66	2.163	98	-1.927	.057	
		Female	50	3.66	1.698				
Emotional		Male	50	13.30	5.515	98	2.572	.012	
		Female	50	13.40	2.650				
Stress of Parents		Male	50	4.32	2.436	98	-.116	.908	
		Female	50	4.14	1.796				

Interpretation

The above table shows gender differences in parental stress across four dimensions i.e. financial, social, family, and emotional, based on independent sample t-tests. Among parents of non-challenged children, males report significantly higher financial stress than females ($p = 0.002$), while other stress types show no significant gender difference. For parents of challenged children, females experience significantly higher social stress than males ($p = 0.037$), and males report higher emotional stress than females ($p = 0.012$). Family stress is marginally higher for males but not significant ($p = 0.057$), and overall stress does not differ significantly by gender in either group. These findings suggest that stress vulnerabilities differ

by gender depending on whether the child is challenged, with males experiencing higher emotional stress and females experiencing higher social stress among parents of challenged children.

Table 2: showing mean difference on stress of parents (Financial Stress) of challenged and non-challenged children with regard to occupation.

	Occupation	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	Sig (2tailed)
Non-Challenge	Business	20	8.55	2.564	.573	2.258	.069
	Farmar	19	8.84	3.060	.702		
	House wife	38	7.42	1.004	.163		
	Service	11	9.45	3.446	1.039		
	Teachers	12	8.92	3.476	1.003		
Challenge	Business	14	3.93	1.979	.529	.165	.955
	Farmar	24	4.46	2.536	.518		
	House wife	39	4.28	1.791	.287		
	Service	9	4.11	2.619	.873		
	Teachers	14	4.07	2.336	.624		

Interpretation

For parents of non-challenged children, financial stress varies slightly by occupation, with service professionals reporting the highest stress (Mean = 9.45) and housewives the lowest (Mean = 7.42). However, the p-value of 0.069 is just above 0.05, indicating that these differences are not statistically significant. This suggests that occupation does not have a meaningful impact on financial stress for these parents. Similarly, among parents of challenged children, financial stress levels are relatively consistent across occupations, with farmers experiencing slightly higher stress (Mean = 4.46) and business professionals the lowest (Mean = 3.93). The high p-value of 0.955 confirms no significant occupational effect on financial stress for these parents.

Table 3: Showing mean difference on stress of parents (Social Stress) of challenged and non-challenged children with regard to occupation.

	Occupation	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	Sig (2tailed)
Non-Challenge	Business	20	10.35	2.581	.577	.895	.470
	Farmar	19	10.95	3.472	.796		
	House wife	38	11.26	2.214	.359		
	Service	11	11.00	3.317	1.000		
	Teachers	12	9.58	4.078	1.177		
Challenge	Business	14	2.86	1.956	.523	2.717	.034
	Farmar	24	1.71	1.122	.229		
	House wife	39	2.95	1.169	.187		
	Service	9	2.56	2.555	.852		
	Teachers	14	2.86	1.791	.479		

Interpretation

Among parents of non-challenged children, social stress levels vary slightly by occupation, with housewives experiencing the highest stress (Mean = 11.26) and teachers the lowest (Mean = 9.58).

However, this difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.470$), suggesting that occupation does not impact social stress for these parents. In contrast, for parents of challenged children, social stress varies significantly by occupation ($p = 0.034$), with farmers reporting the lowest stress (Mean = 1.71) and housewives and business owners experiencing higher levels (Means = 2.95 and 2.86, respectively). This indicates that occupation meaningfully influences social stress levels for parents of challenged children.

Table 4: Showing mean difference on stress of parents (family Stress) of challenged and non-challenged children with regard to occupation.

	Occupation	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	Sig (2tailed)
Non-Challenge	Business	20	5.90	2.614	.584	2.602	.041
	Farmar	19	7.26	4.175	.958		
	House wife	38	8.32	3.647	.592		
	Service	11	9.45	3.387	1.021		
	Teachers	12	6.75	2.989	.863		
Challenge	Business	14	2.86	2.413	.645	2.636	.039
	Farmar	24	1.50	.978	.200		
	House wife	39	2.69	1.195	.191		
	Service	9	2.22	1.922	.641		
	Teachers	14	2.57	2.065	.552		

Interpretation

For parents of non-challenged children, family stress significantly varies by occupation, with service professionals experiencing the highest levels (Mean = 9.45) and business owners the lowest (Mean = 5.90). This difference is statistically significant ($p = 0.041$), indicating that occupation affects family stress in this group. Similarly, for parents of challenged children, farmers report the lowest family stress (Mean = 1.50), while business owners report higher stress levels (Mean = 2.86). Here, too, the difference is statistically significant ($p = 0.039$). These findings suggest that occupation significantly influences family stress levels for parents, regardless of whether their children are challenged or not.

Table 5: Showing mean difference on stress of parents (Emotional Stress) of challenged and non-challenged children with regard to occupation.

	Occupation	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	Sig (2tailed)
Non-Challenge	Business	20	9.85	2.183	.488	1.038	.392
	Farmar	19	10.74	2.684	.616		
	House wife	38	10.92	2.551	.414		
	Service	11	11.45	2.770	.835		
	Teachers	12	11.33	2.605	.752		
Challenge	Business	14	3.07	1.639	.438	4.917	.001
	Farmar	24	4.96	2.116	.432		
	House wife	39	3.67	1.691	.271		
	Service	9	3.78	1.856	.619		
	Teachers	14	5.50	2.029	.542		

Interpretation

Among parents of non-challenged children, emotional stress varies slightly by occupation, with service professionals reporting the highest stress (Mean = 11.45) and business owners the lowest (Mean = 9.85). However, this difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.392$), suggesting that occupation does not significantly influence emotional stress for this group. In contrast, for parents of challenged children, emotional stress differs significantly by occupation ($p = 0.001$), with teachers experiencing the highest levels (Mean = 5.50) and business owners the lowest (Mean = 3.07). These findings indicate that while emotional stress remains relatively consistent across occupations for parents of non-challenged children, it varies significantly for parents of challenged children based on occupation.

Table 6: Showing mean difference on stress of parents of challenged and non-challenged children with regard to occupation.

	Occupation	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	F	Sig (2tailed)
Non-Challenge	Business	20	34.65	8.080	1.807	1.279	.284
	Farmar	19	36.58	9.495	2.178		
	House wife	38	37.92	5.763	.935		
	Service	11	40.55	9.512	2.868		
	Teachers	12	35.17	9.684	2.796		
Challenge	Business	14	12.71	5.902	1.577	.842	.502
	Farmar	24	12.63	3.308	.675		
	House wife	39	13.59	2.863	.458		
	Service	9	12.67	5.916	1.972		
	Teachers	14	15.00	6.051	1.617		

Interpretation

For parents of non-challenged children, overall stress varies by occupation, with service professionals reporting the highest levels (Mean = 40.55), followed by housewives (Mean = 37.92), and business owners the lowest (Mean = 34.65). However, this variation is not statistically significant ($p = 0.284$), suggesting occupation does not meaningfully impact overall stress in this group. Similarly, among parents of challenged children, teachers report the highest overall stress (Mean = 15.00), while business owners and farmers report slightly lower levels (Means = 12.71 and 12.63, respectively). With a p-value of 0.502, these differences are also not statistically significant. These findings suggest that occupation does not significantly affect overall stress levels for parents in either group, implying that other factors may be more influential in determining parental stress.

Table 7: Showing relationship between stress of parents (Financial Stress, Social Stress, family Stress, and Emotional Stress) and parenting age of challenged and non-challenged children.

			Economical	Social	Family	Emotional	Stress of Parents
Non-Challenge	Parenting Age	Pearson Correlation	-.198	.026	.072	-.060	-.033
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.049	.800	.476	.551	.743

Challenge N=100	Parenting Age	Pearson Correlation	.042	.170	.161	.196	.236
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.680	.090	.110	.050	.018

Interpretation

The analysis reveals distinct relationships between parenting age and stress types for parents of challenged and non-challenged children. For non-challenged children, a negative correlation exists between parenting age and financial stress ($r = -0.198, p = 0.049$), indicating that older parents experience less financial stress, though no significant correlations were found for social, family, emotional, or overall stress. In contrast, for parents of challenged children, parenting age shows a more complex relationship with stress. No significant link was found between age and financial or family stress. However, as parenting age increases, emotional stress also rises ($r = 0.196, p = 0.050$), and overall parenting stress shows a positive and significant association ($r = 0.236, p = 0.018$). These findings suggest that while older parents of non-challenged children may experience reduced financial stress, parents of challenged children tend to encounter greater emotional and overall stress as they age, indicating varied stress dynamics based on parenting age and child challenges.

Discussion

This analysis reveals nuanced variations in parental stress, segmented by child status (challenged vs. non-challenged) and impacted by gender, occupation, and parenting age. For parents of non-challenged children, males experience significantly higher financial stress than females (Garner & Toney, 2020), while females of challenged children show greater social stress, and males show heightened emotional stress (Nelson et al., 2009; Hadadian, 1994). These findings highlight how specific stress dimensions are influenced by gender and may reflect traditional role expectations, where male financial responsibility and female social connectivity could be contributing factors (Falk et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2020; Penning & Wu, 2016). The study showed that occupational impacts on stress levels are also notable. Service professionals consistently report the highest financial and family stress across both groups, suggesting that high-demand, time-intensive jobs may elevate specific stressors (Malik & Shahabuddin, 2015; Pich, 2018). Interestingly, while housewives of non-challenged children report the lowest financial stress, they exhibit higher social stress (Liu & Merritt 2018). Conversely, parents of challenged children demonstrate significant occupational-based differences, with business owners and farmers reporting lower overall stress, which may imply greater resource flexibility or reduced daily pressures compared to fixed-schedule occupations (Lu et al., 2023; Johnson & Leung, 2019). In the study, parenting age introduces another layer, with older parents of non-challenged children experiencing lower financial stress but challenged child parents facing greater emotional and overall stress as they age (Oyarzún-Farías, 2021; Bayoumi et al., 2023; Puff & Renk, 2014). The positive correlation between age and stress in challenged-child parents might be attributed to cumulative caregiving demands or reduced resilience over time, a trend noted in previous literature on the stresses associated with prolonged caregiving (Brown et al., 2021). This age-stress relationship underlines the importance of supportive measures for aging parents, especially in families with unique caregiving challenges (Luichies, 2019; Marino et al., 2020; Jopp & Boerner, 2023).

Conclusion

This study highlights distinct stress patterns among parents of challenged and non-challenged children, influenced by gender, occupation, and parenting age. Findings indicate that parents of challenged children

experience unique stressors, including elevated emotional and social stress, often due to prolonged caregiving demands and cumulative responsibilities. In contrast, parents of non-challenged children encounter stress related more broadly to parenting roles, with variations noted across occupational and societal expectations. These insights emphasize the importance of developing targeted support systems and interventions that address the specific stressors faced by each group, thereby promoting enhanced family well-being and effective coping strategies across diverse parental contexts.

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