

Original Research

Parental Stress and Child Rearing Decisions

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Abstract

In our modern society parenting is a difficult and undervalued task. Today parents raise children in isolation with very little support yet face immense criticism when they experience problems. Families who do not fit the western image of the 'ideal family' face even more stress (as they are pressured to conform) yet often find that available services do not easily meet their needs. This paper uses conversational interviews to develop a shared understanding of the experiences of these parents. The factors identified in this research were: the interaction between the desire to parent differently than their own parents, their stress levels, the satisfaction they experienced from the parenting role and their ability to develop a range of coping strategies. Coping strategies focused around the role of religion, culture and routines in providing frameworks for shaping their new lives, and the availability of practical and emotional support in giving parents the resources to manage.

Key Words: Parenting; families; stress; diversity

Introduction

In the past, becoming a parent was seen as the final marker of the transition from adolescence into adulthood (Whitehead, 1998). Having children was something most people wanted to do as it brought with it adult status and a respected place in the community. In our modern world, parenting no longer holds this seminal role, and many people believe they can make other, important contributions to society without having children (Gittens, 1993; Stacey, 1996). In the western world in particular, children are increasingly being perceived as troublesome, demanding of time and resources, and possibly not worth the time and effort required to raise them. Children are positioned as:

... a 'consumer choice' and parents as 'users' who must pay for them. Children, the argument goes, are a private indulgence rather than a public good, and the decision about whether or not to have them is a consumer choice like any other. People who make this choice are, therefore, no more entitled to special benefits or tax concessions than people who have pets. ... To have children is to give up adult social networks in favour of child-centred ones, to lose the freedom to travel, eat out, and pursue hobbies and personal growth. Children, in this discourse, are vampiric, sucking the life from their parents, while the 'child-free' enjoy a rich and rewarding life. (Langer, 2005, pp. 166-7)

In reflection of this view of children we see a society developing in which children's needs are considered unimportant. Fiona Stanley, the 2003 Australian of the Year, for example, has claimed that many parts of Australian cities are potentially "...hostile and damaging to

children” and that the “...built environment works against healthy child development in terms of the design and position of housing, parklands, transport systems and even how a community can function in terms of providing social support” (Stanley, 2006, p. 1). In the social policy arena, the under-valuing of parenting and children is reflected in, for example, poor parental leave provisions, the high numbers of mothers who take on part-time and casual work and poor supports offered for caring – both in the home and in formal alternatives such as childcare (Pocock, 2005). Media and advertisers are increasingly positioning children as sexualised beings, justifying such positioning on the basis of sales figures without consideration of the implications of this for children themselves (Rush & La Nauze, 2006). In America, Garbarino has long claimed that we are creating a world that is socially toxic to children (Garbarino, 1992, 2006). In this world, characterised by escalating bad outcomes for children (e.g., see Stanley, Prior, & Richardson, 2005), parenting becomes an increasingly difficult task as parents struggle to cope with the many competing expectations and demands with little or no support available to them (Sims, 2002).

Modern parents in the western world are raising their children in a world uncaring and unsupportive of their needs. The very nature of this complex and demanding responsibility ensures that parents experience considerable stress which impacts both on their own personal resources and on their ability to parent effectively (Moore et al., 2006; Parke et al., 2004). Parents who closely identify with the hegemonic culture, whose needs match with the services available to them, and who have the resources to make use of informal and formal services (in other words parents who ‘fit’ the hegemonic stereotype of what parents should be) will not be exempt from this stress. These parents operate in a world that devalues their role and often makes even the normal tasks of the day difficult to achieve.

Western stereotypes define parents as white, middle class, with two (and a little bit) children, a father in employment and a mother undertaking the caring role at home (Reiger, 2005). Following this stereotype, good mothering “...privilege(d) idealisations of white middle-class family life and was race and class biased...” which became “...embodied in policies and laws which regulate and control mothers, especially those who don’t fit the white, middle-class, heterosexual family model...” (McMahon, 2004, p. 10090). In other words, parents who, for whatever reason, do not fit the ‘ideal family’ stereotype are likely to feel additional stress, as they will experience pressures to conform to the norm, to adapt who they are and what they do in order to ‘fit in’ and ‘be like everyone else’.

Whilst modern rhetoric is that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, our hegemonic stereotypes defining the ‘ideal family’ promote an image of success which requires parents to ‘go it alone’ within their nuclear family unit. Government policies reinforce this notion, particularly in the area of family support where services are typically available only to those families who are identified as at risk, or potentially at risk (either at individual or community/population levels). In accepting support and services, families acknowledge that they have failed to ‘go it alone’ and this makes them somehow less worthy than others. Many of our family support services have evolved out of our hegemonic imaging of the family, and this can mean that they do not effectively meet the needs of families who are different (Sims, 2002). For example, Australian research demonstrates that our universal services struggle to engage all families, particularly those families who are disadvantaged and/or vulnerable (Centre for Community Child Health, 2006). These families are trapped in a no-win situation: they ‘admit failure’ by reaching for support yet that support often does not meet their needs thus they fail to achieve their objectives, reinforcing their feelings of failure. The consequences are that we are seeing more and more families who meet the definition of ‘risky families’ with long term negative outcomes for children (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). It is essential that we challenge our hegemonic understanding of families

so that we can design and implement family support services that more effectively meet the needs of all families. The project reported here aimed to contribute towards a growing understanding of the lives of families who do not fit the western hegemonic image of the family, helping to inform effectiveness and inclusiveness of family support programmes.

Methodology

Research Questions

The questions asked in the study were:

1. What are the stressors experienced by families who do not fit the western hegemonic definition of an 'ideal family'?, and
2. How do these families cope with these stressors?

Conceptual Framework

Parenting consists of social practices as identified by Giddens (1984) in Structuration theory. These social practices make up the day-to-day life of families and consist of routines, roles, power, interactions and day-to-day experiences. These social practices occur within an ecological framework: the family constitutes a microsystem that is, itself, embedded in a wider exosystem and macrosystem. Culture creates the framework that is interpreted at the community level in the exosystem, and at the microsystem level within the family.

In attempting to understand how parents proceed with their task of parenting this project has been informed by an interpretive paradigm (Sarantakos, 1998) containing elements of both phenomenology and social interactionism. Crotty (1996) refers to phenomenology as a technique for gathering participants' lived experiences. Social interactionism suggests that cultural symbols, and a shared understanding of those cultural symbols, shape the meaning attached to specific actions (Blumer, 1969). Both perspectives contribute to a social construction approach that locates frames of meaning held by individuals as the locus of interpretation and understanding of the world. 'Frames of meaning' (Bruner, 1990) is a term comparable to 'conceptual models' used by Gelman in the education literature (Gelman, 1997) and 'schema' by Piaget in the developmental psychology literature (Piaget, 1952). Parents' frames of meaning determine how they interpret the world, how they determine which strategies to use to interact with the hegemonic and their own worlds, and how, on the basis of this understanding, they rear their children.

Participants

The researchers purposely identified categories of parents who did not fit the hegemonic stereotype of the 'ideal family'. The categories chosen were parents who were members of a cultural minority group, parents who had large families (more than 3 children), or parents who were sole parents. In part the sample was one of convenience, as access to participants was through a snowballing technique beginning with networks known to interviewers and extending out from there. Interviewers were employed from range of backgrounds as follows: Iranian Baha'i Farsi speaker and mother, Yugoslavian speaker and mother, Asian mother, Australian mother (of Italian descent), a single male and an Australian mother. There is no claim that the participants are representative of families who do not fit the 'ideal family' stereotype as the aim of the research is to give the families a voice to share their experiences and contribute to a shared understanding of their needs. All families were recruited from a large state capital in Australia. All participants were required to have children living at home at the time of the interviews but there was no attempt to select based on the ages of children.

Thirty parents were interviewed. All had between one and four children. Most were married; although a sample of nine sole parents were deliberately sought. Parents came from a range of different ethnic backgrounds although some preferred to self-identify by their religious affiliation rather than their ethnicity. The participants and their individual characteristics were as follows:

1. Helen: Married Iranian Baha'i woman with one child. Interview conducted in Farsi
2. Ella: Married Iranian Baha'i woman with two children
3. Celine: Married Iranian B'Hai woman with three children. Interview conducted in Farsi
4. Melissa: Married Iranian Baha'i woman with two children
5. Sophia: Married Iranian Baha'i woman with one child
6. Louise: Single Aboriginal mother with one child
7. Simone: Single Australian mother with one child
8. Anne: Single Australian mother with one child
9. Denise: Single Australian mother with two children
10. Cheryl: Single Aboriginal mother with 4 children
11. Catherine: Single mother with two children
12. Bronte: Single mother with four children
13. Sally: Married mother with four children
14. Samantha: Married mother with four children
15. Terry: East Timorese non custodial father with four children
16. Patrick: Irish non custodial father with two children
17. Timon: Married Portuguese father with two children
18. Eli: Married Serbian man with two children
19. Benjamin: Married English father with one child
20. Tai: Married Asian father with two children. Susan's husband.
21. Li: Married Asian father with two children.
22. Telon: Married Iranian B'Hai father with two children
23. Madu: Married Indonesian father with one child, mother-in-law living with the family
24. Ethan: Samantha's husband – married with four children
25. Mona: Married Pakistani woman with three children
26. Sula: Married Malaysian woman with one child
27. Susan: Married woman of Asian background with two children. Susan's husband also participated in the study
28. Elizabeth: Married woman of Asian background with two children
29. Zena: Married Bosnian woman with two children
30. Asha: Married Yugoslavian woman with one child

Method

Parents were asked to participate in an unstructured conversational interview (Sarbin, 1986). Narrative interviews were chosen because of the potential to engage in story-telling (Mair, 1988) to illustrate issues. This approach allows a richness and immediacy in data collection that was considered most relevant both for the topic and for building from the strengths of the participants. The interviewing strategy used helped to ensure that each participant felt able to share his/her own information in a way most relevant to him/her, and not constrained by any requirements imposed by the interviewer.

Families were interviewed in English unless otherwise stated above. With the permission of participants, interviews were recorded and the interviewer later made a transcription of each interview. Pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions to protect the identity of the participants. Interviews took place at a venue nominated by each participant.

Ethical Issues

Ethical consent for the project was received from the university which requires research to follow the standards laid out in the Australian [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/e35syn.htm) (<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/e35syn.htm>). Participants signed consent forms after being supplied with written information about the project as required by the national guidelines. Interviewers were trained in appropriate and ethical interviewing techniques, particularly addressing the ethical tensions inherent in interviewing people known to them. They were provided with information on available support services should any participant require support or counselling as a result of the research. They were also provided with information on available community services so they could pass on information to participants if this was relevant. All interviewers signed a stringent declaration of confidentiality to ensure that they understood the information they gained from participants as part of the research process must not be used in any other context, either through direct or indirect disclosure. Recordings of interviews were destroyed immediately transcriptions were completed and the transcriptions themselves used pseudonyms so no identifying information was written on them. Only each interviewer knew the true identity of the participants s/he interviewed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using a process of constant comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify and describe themes in the data related to the conceptual framework. Colaizzi's (1978) recommended steps for analysis informed the process. Themes reported in this article are those arising out of the discussion around the categories identified in the conceptual framework and are those issues parents themselves considered of most importance in constructing and understanding their parenting experiences.

Results

Desire to Parent Differently to Own Experience

Out of the 30 parents interviewed, a number expressed a desire to parent differently from their own parents. They felt that their childhood had impacted negatively on their own development and in addition some felt that certain strategies were not effective or threatened their own wellbeing.

I do not want my child to grow up like me, my parents did not shout at me but it was 100 percent obedience and we could not question it, I see many shortcomings in myself because I never had the chance to question anything. I want ...different for my child. (Helen)

Parents who felt strong identification with a particular cultural background reported both drawing strength from cultural influences and also finding it stressful to incorporate particular cultural behaviours into life in an Australia context. One father (Li) of Chinese background related how he had made a conscious decision to put his children to bed early so he could spend more time with his wife and so his children would not be so tired. This contrasted directly with his childhood experience in China, where it was customary to keep

children with parents and go to sleep as a family. Due to his childhood memory of often being tired, he chose to alter this custom within his family once he came to Australia.

A common discipline strategy discussed by a number of parents was smacking. This appeared to be a discipline technique that, for many, represented a parenting behaviour they remembered and did not want to repeat. Some parents, although they reported feeling comfortable about receiving physical punishment as children, still chose to try not to use it themselves. Parents also expressed similar feelings about yelling, saying that they tried not to smack or yell, and reported feeling negative about their parenting when this occurred, and some equated these behaviours to a loss of control.

I don't think it bloody works anyway! I figured out, as a child growing up, I used to cop the strap and it wouldn't work but I used to get it...yeah, I just don't believe in hitting them. (Bronte)

Mainly trial and error...I've never been really fond of smacking, I did smack (eldest child) a couple of times but I found that doing that really fuelled my anger and achieved nothing...I just got much angrier...I just had this suspicion that I could, you know, just stand there and beat the shit out of him and I thought...I don't want to go down that road. (Sally)

Yeah, I'm not very keen on that whereas (husband) got whacked the living daylights out of him as a kid. (Samantha)

...Physical punishment was the order of the day...and I don't think it actually did us any harm so I don't think it was wrong we just chose to be different, I have whacked the kids a couple of times and it has worked...they understand what I'm talking about...it's more to shock them out of their behaviour not to try to do an injury...but no we don't really use physical punishment (Ethan)

My mum was very strict...I don't believe that children should be seen and not heard...if my mum said shut up we never said a word...yet I have a lot of respect for my mum for being that way and I did turn out as well as I did because she's raised us that way but I'm raising (my child) just a little bit differently and mum's a lot more lax with her too. (Anne)

Parenting Satisfaction

The contentment that parents reported in relation to their parenting strategies often seemed to be attached to how they felt about themselves, and how successful they felt they had been in adopting and consistently carrying out their desired parenting techniques. As in Rodd's (1992) study, most mothers reported finding parenting difficult and at times stressful, despite expressing love for their children and a desire to parent. Parents, especially mothers expressed disappointment at repeating parenting behaviours they had determined not to.

I think that being a parent is really hard and I think that people should never take it lightly. (Anne)

...I can still hear myself saying things that my Mum used to say to me I can't help myself it just blurts out...(Celene)

...We are more aware how to be a good parent...but when it comes to spending time with kids you are always tired...and I realise sometimes I am the same and I do not like when I think about it...When I talk to my

son I hear my dad talking and the things I do I am very similar to him...but I am repeating him.(Ella)

One single mother with four children described the fear that her mother had instilled in her through the use of a cane hung on the wall, coupled with shaming techniques, and spoke of feeling that despite trying to consistently use different techniques she was not always able to parent in the way that she wish to.

I still yell...I don't feel happy about it...I try very hard because I know that the parenting tools my mum used, they say that you parent the way your parents did, and I watch, and I, fucking I do it sometimes you know, and it really annoys me when I do it...Like, you know, you want to do things differently and in a way that you want and yet sometimes, things just come out sometimes don't they...I don't respect myself if I hit, I don't respect myself if I yell and I don't like using Mum's techniques. (Bronte)

Mothers who reported having experienced or perceived an unhappy childhood, a poor attachment with a parent or a general feeling of an inability to cope tended to report more definite and passionate desire to engage in substantially different parenting strategies and were more dissatisfied when they felt this was unsuccessful.

I was brought up in a really rigid and authoritarian background...we had a pretty awful time as kids...I wanted that cycle to end with me...I know I'm nowhere near getting it right but I'm aware of the work I need to do and that parenting is hard...I watch other parents...I've read tonnes of books and attended courses ... I try to learn from everyone and everything around me. (Susan)

It is sad but I am repeating what my mum used to do, I always say to myself I won't be like her but I think I am...sometimes I say Oh my God I am my mum. (Melissa)

We never had that sort of relationship things weren't really discussable...I try to be open with them I think the main thing children need which I don't feel that I've done...give them that absolute certainty that no matter what they do you will always love them and I don't think I've done a very good job of that and that is the one thing I really want to give my children... I was frightened of her being a daughter I'm frightened of repeating that mother/daughter relationship. Also I see myself repeating that sick child syndrome, the same as my mother did with my brother, I give into her all the time and I think God I'm going to pay for this but it's hard because she's been so sick. (Sally)

Differing levels of anxiety or concern regarding the parenting decisions they made, how their children felt about them and the long term impact were discussed. Mothers who generally expressed having experienced a happy or satisfactory childhood tended to be more philosophical about their parenting techniques and were generally satisfied with the home life they were providing.

Supports and Coping Mechanisms

1. Religion and Culture

When discussing support and or strategies that assisted their family life, participants cited religious and cultural beliefs as being most influential for their parenting and reported that

they generally gained strength and assistance from these beliefs. It appeared that religion not only provided these families with support but created structure for them as families.

Very important, I could not survive without religion...I taught my son from an early age how to pray and how to go to God whenever he has difficulty. (Elizabeth)

Park (2005) cites research which supports the link between religion and general well-being, coping with stress and adversity. She explains that religious meaning is often important for coping. A number of women for whom religion formed an important part of their lives spoke of relying on it in some way, not only in day to day life but throughout their lives. Whether religion itself could be said to form part of a coping tool is unclear but certainly a number of these women attributed religion to feelings of success or peace. Religion also appeared in the case of the Baha'i faith to provide a sense of community from which they drew strength.

When the spirit is in high we can overcome life difficulties. (Helen)

(A sense of community) To Baha'i' community because I see myself as Baha'i first...I can see I do more things according to the principles of the Baha'i faith than the principles of Iranian culture. (Ella)

Being Baha'i is giving me values to hold on it makes it easier to be a good person...I want (my child) to develop these virtues and be a spiritual person and close to God. On Sunday, we have Baha'i children's classes which we do as a family. Baha'i principles always help me throughout my life. I feel strongly I belong to the Baha'i community it is the strongest community I belong to...it gives me a positive sense of living. (Sophia)

...We have regular prayers through the day which is the time we give to God....We try to bring the children up spiritually we are Catholic...we make that part of our lives. (Samantha)

Many immigrant families expressed a strong reliance on their family network and strong ties with other families of similar beliefs. This was especially true of the Iranian Baha'i people who were interviewed, who reported very strong beliefs in the importance of family. This included a strong desire for children to be part of all gatherings, and most of the women interviewed did not wish to seek entertainment that did not involve their children.

Unity in the family is very important and family togetherness brings unity to the whole family. (Sophia)

I could not survive if we did not have family togetherness. (Elizabeth)

It is a part of our culture....We have a very close network and support...when I need them to be there they are there. (Ella)

2. Routines

According to Dickstein (2002) the use of routines has capacity to improve family functioning and cohesiveness. Howe (2002, p.437) identifies family routines and rituals as having special importance for family life and Imber-Black (2002, p. 445) opines that they strengthen family relationships. The quality of these may be indicative of the quality of family functioning (Howe, 2002). Certainly Coldwell, Pike and Dunn (2006) indicate household chaos is linked to increasing child behaviour problems. Family functioning may also be further affected by family size.

For some families the presence of religious beliefs and practices provided the basis for routines to develop, such as family prayer-time, religious classes or attending church. Howe's (2002) identification of routines as important and strengthening for family life was supported by a number of participants who spoke of relying heavily upon routines. Others reported that they had dispensed with routines in the past because they added to their stress. Mothers who described their home life as chaotic or disorganised tended to report less use of routines. Routines and rituals formerly adhered to may be abandoned due to lack of time or partner support and this may also affect the quality of family interactions.

I don't know that I have got that much routine because I'm very volatile which is of the worst kind of parents because ooh we don't know whether mummy's going to explode or laugh today...I see myself as being very haphazard while other people see me as being very organised... (Sally)

I'm very keen on routines as I feel the children know what to expect.
(Susan)

The routines are basically so I can set the rules. (Ella)

Routines in some instances appear to have come about in order to assist the parent and this would support Dickstein's (2002) discussion of improved family functioning. Perhaps the use of routines assists the parent to cope, which in turn positively affects the functioning of the family.

I try to have some sort of routine because it is comforting for me and for the family and everybody knows what to do...we sit together at the round table, every body has their own spot, they know where to sit and that is the routine. (Sophia)

Survival, there's only me she was a week old...if I didn't get a routine with her I wouldn't have five minutes to do the things that I need to get done and also the time to have quiet time for me...if I don't do these things at a set time they don't happen so I think routines are really important. (Anne)

3. Practical and Emotional Support

When discussing support in general, parents cited a variety of strategies and activities which assisted with everyday stress levels. Some sought groups of like-minded people; others sought written information and parenting courses while others seemed to prefer not to seek specific support. In accordance with Howe's (2002) research, the type of support, if any, that was sought and preferred seemed to vary greatly and as explained by Ptacek, Pierce, Eberhardt and Dodge (1999) depend upon people's perceptions of their own ability to cope. As highlighted in the discussion regarding religious support, parents who felt religion was an important part of their lives, often sought and received guidance and support as a result, either through prayer or through the wider religious community. The Baha'i members, in particular appeared to gain a great deal of support simply as a result of their knowledge that they belonged to the Baha'i community.

Research shows that despite the link between lack of support and increase in illness and psychological disturbance the efficiency of social support may depend greatly on the type of support offered, the ability of parents to seek it out and the personality traits of the individual seeking support (Mikulincer & Florian, 1997). Instrumental support (support which takes the form of tangible help or practical assistance) may be more useful for some parents than emotional support (sharing feelings etc) that could in some instances be

unhelpful (Mikulincer & Florian, 1997). Social support was found to alleviate psychological distress more often among people who believed they had control over events around them than those who did not (Lefcourt, Martin and Saleh, 1984, cited in Mikulincer & Florian, 1997). This may suggest that parents who already believed in their ability to cope may be more likely to benefit from social support than those who felt ineffective. Mikulincer and Florian (1997) link the positive effect of social support with attachment style and suggest those individuals with a history of secure parent-child attachment were more likely to seek, find helpful and utilise sources of support.

Thus parents who were themselves positively parented and experienced a secure attachment when young may be more likely to find social support helpful. According to Bowlby (1988), children who are securely attached learn better responses to stress than those who are not, suggesting that parents who were themselves securely attached may be more likely to respond to stress positively, thus affecting the quality of their parenting strategies. Ptacek, Pierce, Eberhardt and Dodge (1999, p. 427) found in a study of students' coping skills, that those who perceived support were more likely to be assertive and to seek further support. It may be then, that parents who feel they lack support may be far less likely to seek it. Rodd (1992) links maternal stress to mothers' beliefs about themselves and their own competence, suggesting that programs that train parents to alter their thinking are likely to be helpful in reducing stress. This in turn may prove more effective in improving parenting strategies than more conventional types of parenting programs (Sims, 2002).

In addition to mentioning strength gained from religious/personal beliefs, mothers referred to written information and parenting courses as resources they had at some point relied on to assist with their parenting. Family and friend networks were also cited as providers of support. Tangible support was cited by a mother with four children who had experienced increased stress due to the long illness of her youngest child:

I did contact (support agency) reluctantly and they said well if you're having a nervous breakdown well we'll come into your home and look after your child for you ..which wasn't really...I didn't want someone to come and take her away, I wanted them to come and clean the house, cook meals ...so they couldn't offer me anything that was helpful...what would have been really really good would have been someone to cook and clean...When I had my third child I did not cook a meal for two weeks (a group of friends organised a meals roster) and that was just fantastic.
(Sally)

The above is supported by Mikulincer and Florian (1997) in their discussion of tangible supports versus emotional support, which may not necessarily be helpful for coping. Perhaps the provision of physical support may help to provide a less stressful environment, leaving a parent with a greater ability to cope with everyday parenting demands.

...Then that beautiful time that she's sleeping which can be up to two or three hours on a really good day is spent not relaxing but running around madly trying to do all the things that I need to do while she's asleep. So, by the time she wakes up I'm very stressed, very exhausted and really not in the mood for having a baby waking up... (Sally)

Information regarding parenting techniques may not always be useful to parents in times of stress as they may be difficult to implement in particular environments or situations. Akil's (2001) research findings regarding stress and memory suggest that being armed with information may not necessarily result in parents always being able to achieve their desired

parenting goals, as they may forget to use desired techniques in the face of a stressful situation.

Sometimes I get so stressed that it's like everything I know I should be doing flies out the window and I just stand there in a big screaming heap.
(Catherine)

If stress is, as Rodd (1992) suggests, related to perception as much as situation, parents may find particular occurrences more or less stressful depending on how successfully they felt they handled a similar situation in the past. Perhaps the combined effects of support, information and a desire to practise particular parenting strategies may be successful so long as the parent is not experiencing what is perceived as high stress. Faced with a difficult situation, or when feeling stressed or unable to cope, parents may be more likely to revert to undesirable parenting techniques, remembered from their own childhood, as a result of being unable to access the memory of the desired alternative.

Conclusion

It seems, given the findings discussed above, that as a result of a combination of available information and personal experiences, parents may make decisions to parent in particular ways and adopt specific parenting strategies that can differ from the way in which they were themselves parented. But it would appear that information and resolve alone are not always sufficient to enable parents to parent in the way they most desire. Instead there are other external and intrinsic factors that may affect their parenting quality and style. The factors identified in this research were: the interaction between the desire to parent differently than their own parents, their stress levels, the satisfaction they experienced from the parenting role and their ability to develop a range of coping strategies. Coping strategies focused around the role of religion, culture and routines in providing frameworks for shaping their new lives, and the availability of practical and emotional support in giving parents the resources to manage.

The study findings indicate the value of service providers taking a multi-dimensional approach to parent support, depending on the level of stress currently perceived and experienced by the parent. Parenting information may provide parents with information and strategies regarding quality parenting, but does not always take into account the stressors which may be present in the parent's life. If parents are to implement strategies, and put into practice the information they receive and the decisions they make, emotional resources and knowledge are required. Aside from the provision of information and knowledge, practical and emotional supports are needed in order for the parent to maintain a level of coping and functioning that allows them to parent well.

Given the impact of family of origin history upon current parenting strategies, it seems relevant to consider the efficacy of counselling which attempts to address childhood history and past relationships. As stress is related to perception, it is necessary to recognise a wide range of stressors and the varying levels of impact they may have. What necessitates support for one family may not present any impact or problem for another and some parents may be stressed by events that do not affect others in the same way. Reduction of stress appears to increase personal functioning, which will in turn positively affect the functioning of the family. A narrow approach, where support agencies work with parents and children with the expectation that they will be able to utilise skills and knowledge in their everyday lives, may in some instances be unrealistic. A focus on reducing general physical and emotional stress may be more helpful by allowing parents the ability to access new information more readily due to decreased stress levels.

This research offers an insight into the experiences of a particular group of parents, chosen because they were different in a range of ways from the hegemonic normative family. As an interpretive study using qualitative methods it would be inappropriate to claim to be representative of other families, and this study makes no such claims. Its purpose is to create an opportunity for these particular families to have a voice, and for that voice to be heard by researchers and others who can use the understanding gained to further shape inclusive training, policy and research.

All children have a right to be raised in the best possible environment and every society has an obligation to assist with the provision of that environment. The provision of necessary support can help to equip parents physically and emotionally to provide that best possible environment more often. With increased satisfaction in parenting, stress is likely to be further reduced, resulting in greater family functioning and better predicted stress responses for future parents. Ultimately we all have a responsibility to advocate for societal recognition of the crucial role parents have in shaping our future as a people and as a nation.

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