

Religious Coping: Is It Effective to Reduce Parent's Stress During the Parenting of Special Needs Children?

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Abstract: The study aims at determining the impact of religious coping on the stress endured by parents of children with special needs. It was conducted using a quantitative approach. The subjects of the study were 122 parents of special needs children, selected using accidental sampling technique. For this study, the Indonesian rendition of Amer et. al's BARCS was used as an instrument to measure the religious coping, while Berry & Jones' Parental Stress Scale was adapted to determine the stress level during the parenting of the children. The data were processed using Variance Analysis and Pearson Correlation statistical technique. The result shows that: 1) the use of religious coping in parenting the children with special needs is on a moderate level, 2) the highest level of stress was noticed on parents of children with a learning disability, in comparison with other disabilities or special needs, 3) the religious coping affected contrastingly on the parents' stress; the higher the use of the coping, the lower the stress level endured by the parents while handling their special needs children, and vice versa.

1 INTRODUCTION

Children with special needs are very different from children in general in several dimensions of their human function (Suran, in Mangunsong, 2014). The challenges faced by parents in the care of children with special needs affect parents' lives in many aspects, to name a few: work, physical and mental health, financial, and social and family relationships as well (Anpalagan, *et al.*, 2021). As a result, parents often experience stress, which is a feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional stress, which can appear both in the form of disorders in the body and behavior (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). In the context of parenting, what is meant by parenting stress is the negative experience of parents in meeting demands in parenting (Berry & Jones, 1995). Zelman & Ferro (2018) defines stress as negative feelings towards oneself and children due to caregiving responsibilities that are felt to be burdensome. The form of negative experience experienced can be in the form of loss of resources such as time, energy, *self-esteem*, control, happiness, or affection when parenting. Research results of Aldosari & Pufpaff (2014), Sownya & Laksmi (2019), Ren, *et al.* (2020), Pocinho & Fernandes (2018), and

Anpalagan, *et al.* (2021), shows that parents of children with special needs experience higher parenting stress compared to parents of children in general. The more severe the child's disability, the higher the parental stress level. Several other studies have shown comparisons of parental stress levels between different types of special needs. Feizi, *et al.* (2014) found that mothers of children who had motor sensory mental problems as well as chronic physical problems were more stressed than mothers of children who had psychological disorders. This result is different from the research of Gupta (2007) which showed that parents of children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and parents of children with developmental disabilities are more stressed rather than parents of children who are infected with HIV, children who have asthma, or children who are developing normally. Meanwhile, from the view of various research journal articles, Shannon (2014) concluded that: 1) the parental distress of children with autism spectrum disorder is higher than parents of children with other developmental barriers who are not autistic; 2) the mother of an autistic child is more prone to depression than the mother of the child who has intellectual disability without autism.

Watson (2022) mentioned several factors that can cause a person to feel stressed. These factors are: 1) Fear and uncertainty. A person will feel stressed when facing something that they cannot control or the solution is unclear; 2) Attitude and perception. How a person perceives a particular world or situation will determine whether they become stressed or not; 3) Unrealistic expectations. A person will become very stressed when hoping that everything will go/happen as they expect; and 4) Change. Some major changes in life can cause stress, even the pleasant ones, such as promotions.

Stress adversely affects the well-being of individuals, both psychologically and physiologically. Therefore, efforts are needed to overcome and to cope with it. One form of stress coping is religious coping, which is a faith-based action that a person takes to reduce stress or overcome problems (Amer, Hovey, Fox, & Eazcalla, 2008). Aflakseir & Mahdiyar (2016) defines religious coping as the use of religious beliefs or practices to cope with stressful life situations. Meanwhile, according to Wortmann (2013), religious coping is a religious response to stress in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral way. This response includes various positive and negative methods and objectives. According to Pargament (Wortmann, 2013), religion is used as a coping strategy against stress, especially when the stressor has touched the limit of personal strength. Religion is able to provide a framework for understanding individuals about emotional and physical suffering and facilitate individuals to be receptive when facing stressors. Research by Sharak, Bonab, and Jahed (2017) on mothers of children with intellectual disabilities shows that positive religious coping is directly related to social functioning, while negative religious coping is significantly related to stress, physical functioning, anxiety, and depression. In the research of Aflakseir & Mahdiyar (2016) it is known that the use of coping strategies can reduce depression in women who have problems in fertility. However, although stress affects a person's psychological well-being, Davis' research (2016) shows that coping religion does not moderate the relationship between stress and psychological well-being.

From the explanation above, it can be seen that the upbringing of children with special needs causes stress in parents, but there are differences in the results of research on the level of stress in parents between various types of special needs of children. Therefore, this study was conducted with the aim of determining the level of stress and the level of

religious coping usage, as well as the effectiveness of religious coping strategy usage toward the stress level of parents with children of various types of special needs.

2 METHODS

The research was conducted with a quantitative approach and a non-experimental design. A sample of 122 parents of children with various types of special needs in Indonesia, which was selected by accidental sampling. Religious coping data were taken using the BARCS (Brief Arab Religious Coping Scale) questionnaire form Amer, Hovey, Fox, & Rezcallah (2008). It consisted of 15 items with 4 response options (not used at all/does not apply, used sometimes, used often, and used always). The parenting stress data were taken using the Parental Stress Scale from Berry & Jones (1995) adapted by the researchers to the context of parenting the special needs children. This scale consisted of 18 items with 4 response options, such as "strongly disagree", "disagree", "agree", "strongly agree". The statistical technique of variance analysis was used to determine the category of stress levels and the use of coping, while the Pearson Correlation statistical technique was used to test the effectiveness of the use of religious coping to stress. The test was performed at a significance level $\alpha = 0.05$.

3 RESULT

In this study, out of a total of 122 parents of special needs children, 27% of the sample were parents of children with mental retardation, 13.9% hearing impairment, 13.1% autism, 12.3% speech disorder, 7.4% slow learner, 6.6% physical impairment, 5.7% ADD/ADHD, 4.9% cerebral palsy, 4.1% visual impairment, 3.3% learning difficulties, and 1.6% emotional disorder. The feature of the stress level of parents with special needs children is shown on Table 1

Table 1 Parents' Stress Levels Based on the Type of Children's Special Need

SPECIAL NEEDS	MEAN	CATEGORY
ADD/ADHD	57	Moderate
AUTISM	55	Moderate
PHYSICAL	51	Moderate

IMPAIRMENT		
CEREBRAL PALSY	55	Moderate
SPEECH DISORDER	52	Moderate
EMOTIONAL DISORDER	56	Moderate
HEARING IMPAIRMENT	51	Moderate
VISUAL IMPAIRMENT	53	Moderate
LEARNING DIFFICULTIES	60	High
SLOW LEARNER	54	Moderate
MENTALLY RETARDATION	52	Moderate

From table 1, it can be seen that parents of children with learning difficulties have a relatively high level of stress, while parents of children in other types of special needs have a moderate level of stress. From this study, it is known that the usage of religious coping by parents of children of various types of special needs is classified as moderate (see table 2).

Table 2. Parents' Religious Coping Levels for Each Type of Children's Special Needs

SPECIAL NEEDS	MEAN	CATEGORY
ADD/ADHD	36	Moderate
AUTISM	34	Moderate
PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENT	36	Moderate
CEREBRAL PALSY	34	Moderate
SPEECH DISORDER	36	Moderate
EMOTIONAL DISORDER	31	Moderate
HEARING IMPAIRMENT	35	Moderate
VISUAL IMPAIRMENT	30	Moderate
LEARNING DIFFICULTIES	28	Moderate
SLOW LEARNER	35	Moderate
MENTALLY RETARDATION	33	Moderate

In addition to examining the level of parents' stress and the use of religious coping in dealing with the stress of parenting children with special needs, this study also examined the effect of religious coping use on parents' stress in parenting special

needs children. The results of testing the effect of religious coping usage on parents' stress can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Test of Religious Coping Effect on Stress

		Religious Coping	Stress
Religious Coping	Pearson Correlation	1	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.012
	N	122	122
Stress	Pearson Correlation	-.226*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	
	N	122	122

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The calculation results in table 3 show that the effect of coping on stress is at a significance level of 0.012 ($p < .05$) with a negative value. That is, religious coping significantly affects stress negatively; the higher use of religious coping, the lower the stress level, and vice versa.

4 DISCUSSION

The results of this study found that in general, parents with special needs children have a moderate level of stress, regardless of their children's type of special needs. This means, most parents with special needs children are still quite able to cope with stress in the care of their special needs children. Unlike the case on parents of children who have learning difficulties, their stress level is relatively high. This means that parents of children who have learning difficulties experience far more obstacles in overcoming parenting stress. Researcher suspects that this obstacle occurs because parents have unrealistic expectations about their children's academic performance. Physically and socially, children with learning difficulties do not look different from children in general, so parents hope that their children's academic performance will be equivalent to the academic performance of the other child. Because children have learning difficulties, it is certain that they will have difficulty achieving academic achievements like their peers. The discrepancy between the high expectations of parents and the low achievement of children is what causes high stress in parents of children with

learning difficulties. This finding is in accordance with what Watson (2022) has stated, that unrealistic expectations can cause a person to become stressed.

From this study, it was also found that the special needs parents' usage of religious coping was at a moderate level. That is, to overcome the stress in parenting their special needs children, parents do not fully use the religious coping strategy. Referring to Pargament's view of religious coping that religion is used as a backing ground when individuals have reached the "limit of their power" (Wortmann, 2013), then with the finding that their use of coping religion is at a moderate level, it is estimated that the parents of special needs children in this study used religious coping when they felt completely overwhelmed in the face of parenting stress. When the parents of special needs children face parenting stress within the limits of their strength, it can be presumed that they are using other coping stress strategies.

Another finding of this study is that religious coping has a significant negative effect on parenting stress in parents with special needs children, regardless of the type of the child's special needs. That is, the higher the use of religious coping, the lower the parental stress level; the lower the use of coping, the higher the parents' stress level. These findings are in line with the results of the research of Sharak, Bonab, and Jahed (2017) and also with Aflakseir & Mahdiyari's (2016), although these studies were conducted on different populations from this study. Thus, this study reinforces the findings that the use of religious coping is effective in reducing stress level.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From this study, it can be concluded that in general, the level of parental stress in parenting their special needs children is classified as moderate, regardless of the type of special needs of their children. Meanwhile, parents of children who have learning difficulties experience relatively high stress. The use of religious coping by parents in overcoming the parental stress in caring their special needs children is classified as moderate. Religious coping is used by parents as one of the coping strategies in addition to other coping strategies in dealing with the stress of parenting special needs children. Religious coping

is known to be effective in overcoming parental stress in caring their special needs children.

Based on the results of this study, the researcher suggests the need for awareness-raising efforts, generally in parents of special needs children, especially in parents of special needs children who have learning difficulties, to accept both the strengths and weaknesses of their children, as well as to lower their expectations/demands of achievements towards their children. The usage of religious coping needs to be increased by parents in the face of the parental stress in caring for their special needs children. It is also necessary to conduct research on the internal (psychological) factors of parents that cause stress in parenting their special needs children.

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