

THE EFFECT OF PARENTING STRESS ON PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Parenting stress is a significant psychological challenge that influences parents' emotional well-being, parenting practices, and the quality of interactions with their children. Elevated stress levels may reduce parental responsiveness, warmth, and effective communication, thereby affecting the overall parent–child relationship. Understanding this association is essential for promoting healthy family functioning and positive child development. This study aimed to examine the effect of parenting stress on parent–child relationships and to determine the extent to which parenting stress predicts the quality of these relationships. A quantitative, correlational research design was employed. Data were collected from 100 parents using standardized self-report questionnaires measuring parenting stress and parent–child relationship quality. Participants were selected through a convenient sampling technique. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between parenting stress and parent–child relationships. The findings indicated a significant negative relationship between parenting stress and the quality of parent–child relationships. The study concludes that parenting stress poorly affects parent–child relationships. Reducing parenting stress through psychological support, parenting education, stress management programs, and family-based interventions may strengthen parent–child interactions and promote healthier family environments.

I. INTRODUCTION

Parenting is a demanding and complex responsibility that requires adults to respond to children's physical, emotional, and developmental needs. Parenthood can be a source of meaning and satisfaction, but can also lead to psychological pressures if the demands placed on the parent exceed the resources available to deal with these demands. Parenting stress is defined as distress related to parenting or being a parent (Deater-Deckard, 1998). It is not the same as life stress and occurs as part of the parenting role and is shaped by parental attributes, children's actions, family surroundings, and social environments. Persistent or heavy parenting stress can negatively impact on parents' emotional regulation, confidence and relationship to positively engage with their children. The parent–child relationship is a foundation of children's development. A well-developed relationship is defined by warmth, trust, responsiveness, guidance and open communication. Children learn how to manage emotions, how to have social skills, to make healthy attachments and manage challenges through repeated interactions with parents. Belsky's (1984) process model suggests that parenting behaviors are influenced by the psychological resources of

parents, child characteristics, and parenting context-based sources of stress and support. This view proposes that parenting stress can undermine relationship quality by diminishing the emotional supports that parents have to offer in sensitive and consistent parenting. Stressed parents may be less patient, less responsive, more irritable, or more prone to controlling, inconsistent, or avoidant behaviors.

There is empirical support for a relationship between parenting stress and poor family interactions. In a systematic review by Fang et al. (2024), parenting stress was consistently associated to parenting depression, child internalizing and externalizing problems, social support and family problems. They can all affect how parents view children's behavior and their reaction to their needs. High stress parents might see their children's behavior as more challenging and demanding, leading to more conflict and less positive communication. Parenting stress can thus have a direct impact on relationship quality, either by exhausting the parents or by decreasing their involvement in the relationship, as well as an indirect impact via negative parenting practices and mental-health problems of parents. Some aspects of parenting might account for some of the association between stress and child adjustment. Higher parenting stress levels were correlated with more children's behaviour problems and more negative parenting styles, according to a study by Mak et al., (2020). Parenting stress mediated to some extent the relationship between parenting styles and perceived behavior problem. These findings indicate that stress does not stay within the parent, but can be manifest in the ordinary interactions between parents and children in the context of discipline, communication, affection, and supervision. Negative interactions can keep children from feeling close to their parents, cause conflict and make the child less likely to turn to their parents for emotional support when needed.

The relationship can be transactional also. Difficult child behavior can lead to higher levels of parental stress, and increased parental stress can lead to less quality parenting and additional behavioral problems (Neece et al., 2012). This can lead to a vicious circle of stress and relationship issues. Trumello et al. (2023) also found maternal and paternal parenting stress to be related to parents' perceptions of their children's emotional and behavioral functioning. They concluded that both mothers and fathers should be taken into account as stress can have an impact on the family system via each parent's experience and interactions. The impact of parental wellness is further supported by evidence from times of significant disruption. Russell et al. (2022) identified parent stress as a risk factor and depression, burden of the caregiver, and lower parent–child relationship quality as outcomes, while resilience acted as a protective resource. The study by Essler et al. (2021) was a longitudinal study that showed that changes in parental strain were associated with changes in children's well-being and behavior, and positive parental–child relationship quality was a protective factor. The results suggest that supportive relationships can help minimize the effect of stress, and strong stress can cause positive relationships to gradually weaken over time.

Problem Statement

Considering parenting stress as a predictor of parent–child relationship quality in general parent population requires more research to clarify the strength of the parenting stress–parent–child relationship quality relation. Numerous studies have been conducted on clinical groups, specific developmental periods, mothers alone, or unusual situations, all of which restrict the generalizability of their conclusions. Analyzing parent and child relationship patterns along with parenting stress levels together may help identify families where support is needed, before patterns of conflict and emotional distance solidify. The present study seeks to explore the relation between parenting stress and quality of the parent-child relationship and assess the predictive power of parenting stress on parent-child relationship quality.

Research Objectives

1. To determine the level of parenting stress experienced by parents.
2. To assess the quality of parent–child relationships among the selected participants.
3. To examine the effect of parenting stress on the quality of parent–child relationships.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of parenting stress experienced by parents?
2. What is the quality of parent–child relationships among the selected participants?
3. To what extent does parenting stress affect the quality of parent–child relationships?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nature and Sources of Parenting Stress

Parenting stress is defined as the psychological stress experienced when parents feel the demands of parenting are greater than their emotional, social, financial, or practical ability. There is recent research that sees parenting stress as being a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Parental factors can include depression, anxiety, fatigue, low self-efficacy, behavioral problems and disability/ chronic illness, or situational factors such as financial hardship, marital conflict, lack of support, and work–family imbalance. In a systematic review of mothers and fathers, Fang et al. (2024) reported that parenting stress was consistently linked to parental mental-health problems, child emotional and behavioral issues, poor social support, and poor family circumstances. It is not a parenting stress that can be produced only by the weakness of the parents but one that is formed by the interaction of three factors: personal, child-related, and environmental. Stress can be particularly high when parents are not able to provide sufficient time or information or support for their children. Brown et al. (2020) found that when parents' work, educational, health, childcare, and family routines were disrupted, leading to higher levels of perceived stress. Stress was related to anxiety, and also there was an increased risk of negative parenting behaviors; parental support was a protective factor. The study is unusual in pandemic conditions, but demonstrates how outside factors can impact parenting. In a similar fashion, Wang et al. (2022) identified through the meta-analytic structural equation modelling (MSEM) that social support was correlated with improved parental quality of life in part due to an influence on parenting stress. This indicates that emotional support, practical support, information and professional services can help to reduce stress.

Parenting Stress and Parent–Child Relationship Quality

Warmth, responsiveness, communication, emotional closeness, conflict, discipline and parental involvement are some of the most common ways the parent–child relationship is assessed. Parenting stress can undermine these dimensions by taking up the emotional and mental energies required for patient, sensitive and consistent parenting. When parents are strained on a sustained basis they can be more irritable, emotionally unavailable, or more apt to see normal child behaviour as being deliberately challenging. This can lead to fewer positive exchanges and more criticism, conflict, harsh discipline or withdrawal. This has been confirmed by recent discoveries. Mak et al. (2020) investigated the parenting stress level of parents of preschoolers, with greater parenting stress being linked to increased child behavior problems and parent authoritarianism and permissiveness. The negative parenting styles partially mediated the relationship between parenting stress and perceived behavior problems. Stress can then be mediated through the routine and typical caregiving behaviors of parents. Children may not feel as connected and emotionally secure when parents are inconsistent, give too much control, or offer too little guidance.

Jang et al. (2021) further validated this finding in the parent–child relationship by looking at satisfaction, communication, and limit setting. All three parenting stress dimensions were negatively correlated with parenting stress. Additionally, communication and limit setting explained the relationship between parenting stress and children's dietary behaviors. The results indicate that parenting stressors can impact children through specific processes of relating, not just stress. Lack of communication can lead to parents not knowing how to react when children are feeling this, whereas unclear limits can leave parents uncertain and in conflict. Longitudinal studies also show that there is a temporal relationship between parental strain and relationship quality. During the pandemic, Essler et al. (2021) discovered that there were links between parental strain, parent–child relationship quality, children's well-being, and behavioral difficulties at two points in time. Positive relationship quality served as a protective factor, while ongoing strain was a risk factor for adjustment. However, it seems the connection is likely two ways. Stressed parenting can lead to more emotional and behavioral problems, and more difficult child behavior can lead to increased parental stress. Thus, correlational results should not be interpreted as indicating that parenting stress is the sole factor in relationship difficulties.

Child Outcomes, Protective Factors and Intervention Implications

The quality of the parent-child relationship and the relationship to the parenting stress could have significant effects on children's emotional, behavioral and social functioning. Caregivers provide children with security and a

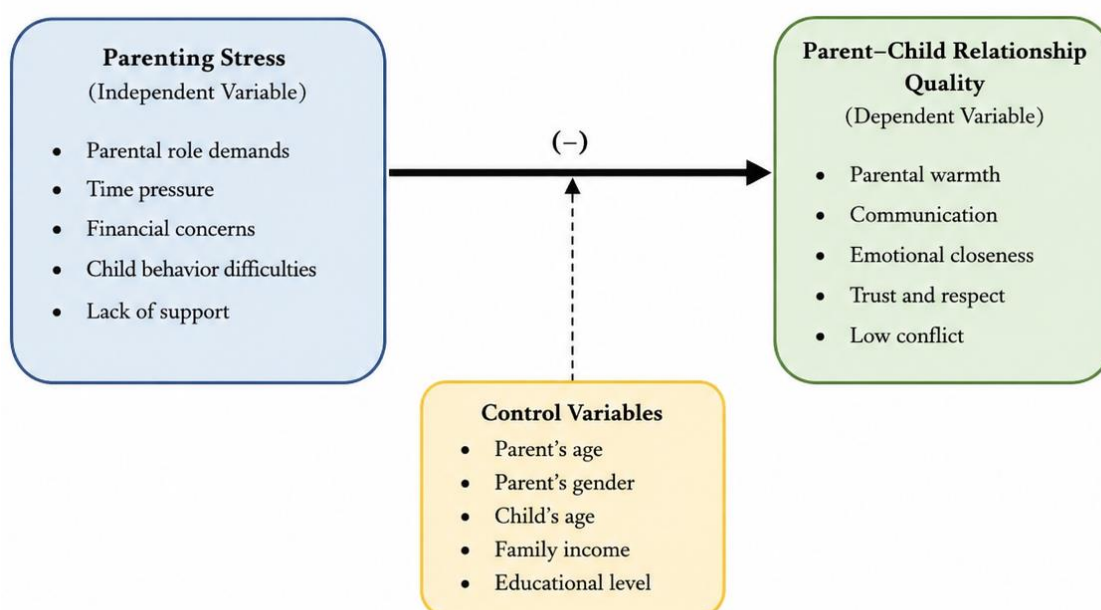
regulation of their emotions, guidance, and models of communication. Stress can decrease parental warmth and consistency, resulting in children exhibiting anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, oppositional behaviour and emotion regulation problems. Trumello et al. (2023) studied the parenting stress of mothers and fathers of preschool children and their perception of emotional and behavioral problems in their children. Stress from both mothers and fathers should therefore be taken into account as both play a role in the family's emotional dynamics. These risks can be lessened by protective factors. Russell et al. (2022) found that parental resilience was related to favourable mental health and improved parent–child relationship quality. Parents who are resilient are more likely to be able to deal with pressure, flex their expectations, ask for assistance and stay connected. The other important resource is social support. According to Wang et al. (2022), more support can lead to lower parenting stress and positive life quality for parents, which will help them to respond more positively to their children. The results indicate that strengthening personal coping resources and broader family support are indicated as targets for interventions.

The literature indicates that parenting-stress interventions should not be limited to the psychological symptoms. Stress-management training, parenting education, communication skills, emotional-regulation strategies, family counseling, and/or practical support may be used in combination in programs. Repetitive conflict or emotional distance can become patterns of interaction that can be prevented by early intervention. Many studies do, however, utilize cross sectional designs, convenience samples, self-report measures and data from mothers, principally. These techniques are prone to making causal inferences and can be subject to reporting bias. Future research should consider both parents, observations of parent-child interactions, culturally diverse samples and longitudinal designs. Overall, the evidence over the last decade suggests that parent stress is correlated with lower parent–child relationship quality, but the magnitude and direction of this relationship varies by the characteristics of the child, parental resources, family characteristics and the amount of support available.

Theoretical Framework

The current study is based on Belsky's (1984) Process Model of Parenting, which suggests that parenting behavior is shaped by parents' psychological traits, characteristics of the child, and the broader social context. This model suggests that high parenting stress may lead to parents being psychologically unavailable, impatient, cold and unresponsive. In turn, stressed parents may communicate less with their children, engage in more conflict, and be less supportive of their children. So the model assumes that higher levels of parenting stress are related to poorer quality parent–child relationships.

Conceptual Framework



III.METHOD

Participants

This study adopted a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the relationship between parenting stress and the quality of parent–child relationships. The study population consisted of parents, and a sample of 100 participants was selected through convenience sampling.

Measures

Data were collected using standardized self-report questionnaires designed to measure parenting stress and parent–child relationship quality. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part included information on age, sex, education level, and family background as well as the number of children. The second section measured parenting stress through statements related to emotional pressure, parenting difficulties, fatigue, and perceived demands of childcare. The third section assessed parent–child relationship quality by examining communication, warmth, emotional closeness, conflict, responsiveness, and parental involvement. The items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale with the options strong disagreement to strong agreement.

Procedure

The mostly participants were the parents of school going children. They were contacted through schools. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their confidentiality, privacy, and voluntary participation were ensured. The collected data were coded and analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize participants’ characteristics and the main study variables. Pearson’s correlation analysis was applied to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between parenting stress and parent–child relationship quality. Simple linear regression analysis was also conducted to assess the extent to which parenting stress predicted the quality of parent–child relationships. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level.

IV.RESULTS

Table I: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	38	38.0
	Female	62	62.0
Age	20–29 years	21	21.0
	30–39 years	43	43.0
	40–49 years	27	27.0
	50 years and above	9	9.0
Educational level	Secondary education	24	24.0
	Bachelor’s degree	49	49.0
	Master’s degree or above	27	27.0
Number of children	One child	32	32.0
	Two children	41	41.0
	Three or more children	27	27.0

The negative regression coefficient indicates that each one-point increase in parenting stress was associated with an estimated 0.55-point decrease in parent–child relationship quality. Parenting stress was therefore a significant negative predictor of the parent–child relationship. Demographic profile of the 100 participants is shown in Table 1. The majority of the respondents were female (62%) and male (38%). The highest group in ages were the parents aged 30-39 years with a proportion of 43% of the sample studied, while 27% of the parents were aged 40-49 years.

In the field of education, almost half had a bachelor's degree and 27% had a master's degree or more. In terms of family size, 41% had 2 children, 32% had 1 child and 27% had 3 or more children. The results suggest that the sample consisted of parents of varying ages, educational levels, and family sizes.

Table II: Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable	No. of Items	M	SD	Range	α
Parenting stress	18	62.40	11.85	35-88	.88
Parent–child relationship quality	24	54.70	10.60	30-78	.86

The reliability of the instruments in this study can be seen in table 2. The Parenting Stress Scale was found to have a Cronbach's alpha of .88, and the Parent–Child Relationship Scale had an alpha of .86. The internal consistency of both coefficients is good (0.71 and 0.73 respectively), which is above the minimum value of 0.70. Thus, the contents of each scale adequately captured the same underlying construct and both instruments were deemed appropriate for this study. Table 2 also shows the descriptive statistics for parenting stress and parent–child relationship quality. The mean plus SD of the parenting stress scores was 62.40 + 11.85, with a range between 35 and 88. Parent–child relationship quality scores were between 30 and 78, with a mean score of 54.70 and a standard deviation of 10.60. The standard deviations reveal a significant variation in the parenting stress and parenting relationship quality scores among the participants. This indicates that there was a significant variation in parents' stress and relationship quality.

Table III: Pearson Correlation Between Parenting Stress and Parent–Child Relationship Quality

Variable	1	2
1. Parenting stress	--	
2. Parent–child relationship quality	–.62***	--

***p* < .001.

As shown in Table 3, there is a significant relationship between parenting stress and parent–child relationship quality. A statistically significant negative correlation was found between the two variables, *r* = –.62, *p* < .001. The negative coefficient means that increased parenting stress was related to poor parent–child relationship. The magnitude of the correlation indicates a moderate correlation. Thus, higher stress levels by parents were associated with lower warmth, communication, emotional closeness, and satisfaction in their relationships with their children.

Table IV: Regression Model Summary and Analysis of Variance

Model Summary					
R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard Error of the Estimate		
.620	.384	.378	8.36		
ANOVA					
Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	4,275.13	1	4,275.13	61.18	<.001
Residual	6,848.51	98	69.88		
Total	11,123.64	99			

Note. Dependent variable: Parent–child relationship quality. Predictor: Parenting stress.

Table 4 shows regression model summary and ANOVA. The model obtained an *R* value of .620 and an *R*² value of .384, indicating that 38.4% of the variance in parent–child relationship quality was accounted for by parenting stress. Other factors not measured in this model (social support, family income, child behavior, marital relationships, parental mental health) account for the remaining 61.6%. The regression model was statistically

significant, $F(1, 98) = 61.18, p < .001$. This indicates that parenting stress had a significant effect on the quality of parent–child relationship.

Table V: Regression Coefficients Predicting Parent–Child Relationship Quality

Predictor	B	Standard Error	Beta	t	p
Constant	89.31	4.55	—	19.63	<.001
Parenting stress	−0.55	0.07	−.62	−7.82	<.001

Note. Dependent variable: Parent–child relationship quality.

Table 5 shows the regression coefficient estimates for predicting parent–child relationship quality. Parenting stress had a significant negative unstandardized coefficient, $B = -0.55, SE = 0.07, \beta = -.62, t = -7.82, p < .001$. This implied that for every 1-point increase in parenting stress, there was a corresponding estimated 0.55-point decrease in parent–child relationship quality. The standardized beta coefficient also suggests that parenting stress had significant negative effects on relationship quality. The results thus lend support to the hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between parenting stress and poorer parent–child relationships.

V. DISCUSSION

This research focused on parenting stress and parent–child relationship among 100 parents. Results indicated a moderately strong negative correlation between parenting stress and parent–child relationship quality. The findings suggest that the higher the level of stress the parents felt, the more likely they were to report a poor relationship with their children. In real-world terms, higher parenting stress can lead to decreased parenting warmth, patience, emotional availability, responsiveness, and effective communication. It can also contribute to conflict, irritability, inconsistent discipline and emotional distancing in the normal parent-child relationship. The negative correlation found in this study is consistent with the findings of recent studies that parenting stress has a negative impact on parenting functioning and family functioning. Based on a systematic review, Fang et al. (2024) found that parenting stress is related to parental depression, child emotional and behavioral issues, social support, and challenging family environments. The factors might hinder parents from being responsive and consistent to their children. The present study thus confirms the notion that parenting stress is not only a psychological process but also a relational one and that parenting stress can impact the family emotional climate.

The results are also in line with Trumello et al. (2023) who found links between maternal and paternal parenting stress and preschool children's emotional and behavioral problems. In more stressful families, parents might react negatively to their children's behaviour and find it easier to be parents. Likewise, Seipp et al. (2024) revealed that parenting stress is associated with children's psychopathological symptoms and parents' negative perceptions of child behavior. This could account for the finding that higher parenting stress levels in the current study were linked to lower levels of relationship quality. A negative parenting perception of the child's behavior can lead the parent to be critical of the child, to pull back, or to over-control the child, which minimizes closeness and positive communication. The regression results showed that parenting stress significantly predicted parent–child relationship quality. Unstandardized coefficients showed that the parenting stress score was associated with an estimated decrease of 0.55 points in the relationship-quality score. Additionally, 38.4% of the variance in parent–child relationship quality was accounted for by parenting stress. This indicates a significant percentage and indicates parenting stress is a significant predictor of family relationship functioning. However, 61.6% of the variation is still unaccounted. Parental mental health, social support, marital satisfaction, family income, family temperament, behavioral problems, coping styles, and cultural expectations are other factors that can impact parent–child relationships.

Recent studies indicate that parent–child relationship is a key pathway through which parenting stress is related to child development. The parent–child relationship mediated the relationship between paternal parenting stress and early childhood development according to Pan et al. (2025). They concluded that parenting stress could have an indirect impact on children by compromising the parenting relationship through which parental emotional support, guidance, and developmental support are provided. In addition, Ribas et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review

and meta-analysis revealing that parental stress was related to emotional and behavioral issues in children at school. The results suggest that parenting stress is important to address early in development before negative interaction patterns become entrenched. The relationship between the variables should not necessarily be considered one-directional. A bidirectional relationship was identified by Wang et al. (2026) where parenting stress was predictive of poorer mother–child relationships over time, and poorer relationships were predictive of parenting stress. This indicates a cycle of negative impact for families – stress reduces communication and closeness, problems in the relationship add to parenting load, and the parenting load further increases stress. The current cross-sectional study design does not allow for determination of the direction of the relationship, that is, if parenting stress led to poorer relationships, or if poorer relationships led to increased parenting stress. The use of the word “effect” should thus be understood as a statistical prediction and not as proof of causation. The results have implications for practice. Strategies for managing and reducing stress, regulating emotions, communicating positively, disciplining consistently, problem-solving, and enhancing parental warmth should all be part of parentingsupport programs. Dubois et al. (2024) reported that the exhausted parents described losing control during interactions with their children, and felt guilty, ashamed and struggled to reach out for support. Intervention should thus not find fault with the parents, but should foster supportive environments where the parents can talk about problems in a safe space. Parental psychological counseling, parenting education, peer-support groups, convenient child care, and family-based services can assist parents in coping with stress and healthy relationships.

Delimitations and recommendations of the study

There are a number of caveats that should be noted. The sample size was small, and the sampling method was convenience sampling, limiting the generalizability of the results. Parenting education programmes should be offered to assist parents to control stress and communication with children. Counselling and psychological support services need to be available to parents who are very stressed. Parents should be encouraged to develop healthy coping skills, such as relaxation, time management and problem solving skills. Interventions based on the family should be implemented to enhance emotional connection and minimize conflict between parents and children. Parents should be provided with support groups at school and/or community organizations to share experiences and seek guidance. It is advisable to have parents to remain consistent in discipline, warmth and responsiveness during stressful situations. Larger sample sizes and longitudinal studies are needed in future research to explore changes in parenting stress and relationship quality over time.

VI. CONCLUSION

The researchers found parenting stress to have a significant negative impact on parenting–child relations. Parents who said they felt more stressed were more likely to say they were less warm, talked to their child less, were less responsive, and were less emotionally close to their children. Findings of correlation and regression indicated that parenting stress was an important predictor of quality of relationships; however, other family, social, and psychological factors may also have a predictive capacity. These results highlight the importance of providing parents with psychological support, parenting education, stress-management training, and family-based interventions. Lowering parenting stress can help to boost parent–child relationships, family function, and child emotional and behavioral well-being.

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