The relationship between challenging behaviors, perceived stress and coping strategies in parents of children with ID in Quebec during the COVID-19 pandemic: Preliminary data

UQÀM | Chaire de déficience intellectuelle et troubles du comportement
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Background

Families with a child with an intellectual disability (ID) are at **greater risk** for COVID-19 **stress** due to their **increased health needs**.

- Parents reported experiencing **more stress** and **worries** about their children's reduced abilities due to the **lack of support services** [1, 2].

Research conducted prior to the pandemic indicates that children with ID have a **higher risk** of **developing behavioral problems** due to their level of **communication** and **social skills** [3].

Emotional and **behavioral disturbances** in children with ID have **been noted** by their parents since the pandemic

- **Emotional irritability**, **sleep difficulties** and **eating disorders** [1, 4];
- Decreased social support and restrictions on usual activities have led to an **escalation** of **challenging behaviors** in children with ID [5, 6].

Coping strategies are identified as an important **protective factor** against stress for parents of children with ID [7].

- Some parents reported **feeling overwhelmed** by the demands of caring for their children with **resources** that have become **limited** [8];
- Others used **proactive coping** strategies by instituting **new routines**.

Aims

The purpose of this research is to examine the **relationship** between **perceived changes in challenging parent behaviors** of their child with ID, **perceived stress** and **coping strategies** implemented by parents within the context of the pandemic.

Method

A quantitative **correlational** design is used with an online questionnaire via *Qualtrics*.

Participants

- To date, **61 Quebec parents** of children with ID have participated in this study (**mothers** = 75.4 %; **fathers** = 26.6 %)
- Average age of children = **10.7 years** (♀ = 57.4 %; ♂ = 42.6 %).

Measuring instruments

- A family socio-demographic questionnaire;
- The *Perceived Stress Scale* with 10 items (PSS-10; Cohen et al., 1983);
- The *Ways of Coping Checklist – Revised* (WCC-R; Vitaliano et coll., 1985);
- A modified version of the *Behavior Problems Inventory* (BPI-01; Rojahn et al., 2001)[1].

Results

Parents reported **deterioration** on all **nine** of their children's behaviors over the **past six months**.

No significant relationship is shown between the increase in **problematic behaviors** of their children and parents' **perceived stress**.

There was a **significant correlation** between **emotion-focused coping** strategies and :

- A **deterioration** in children's **communication skills** (r = -.254, p = .048);
- An **increase** in children's **avoidance behaviors** (r = -.258, p = .045);
- Parents' **perceived stress** (r = .346, p = .006).

There was a **significant positive correlation** between **problem-focused** and **social support-seeking** coping strategies (r = .694, p < .001).

Table 1. Pearson correlations for study variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Destructive behavior towards objects	-.13	.34	–												
2. Difficulties with social interactions	-.48	.60	.181	–											
3. Communication difficulties	-.56	.59	.045	**.607****	–										
4. Agressive behavior toward others	-.16	.41	**.317***	.219	**.300***	–									
5. Stereotyped and repetitive behavior	-.30	.46	**.281***	.149	.182	**.440****	–								
6. Avoidance behavior	-.28	.45	.192	.057	.219	**.285***	**.400****	–							
7. Inappropriate sexual behavior	-.08	.28	.238	.063	.123	.171	.200	-.052	–						
8. Defiance behavior	-.48	.50	.116	.179	.047	.099	.176	**.360****	.194	–					
9. Self-injurious behavior	-.07	.31	**.392****	.190	**.252***	**.434****	**.448****	.225	.131	.011	–				
10. Perceveid stress	23.48	5.55	-.152	-.031	-.050	.034	-.029	-.059	.080	-.156	-.030	–			
11. Problem-focused coping	29.54	3.50	.060	-.002	-.117	-.247	.090	.002	.081	.120	.125	-.177	–		
12. Emotion-focused coping	23.97	4.22	-.049	-.033	**-.254***	-.098	-.065	**-.258***	.240	.126	.075	**.346****	.228	–	
13. Seeks social support	22.26	3.84	.090	-.127	-.140	-.014	.045	.004	.083	.100	.099	-.123	**.694****	.213	–

* p < .05. ** p < .01.

Discussion

Preliminary results seem to suggest that during the pandemic, some **problematic behaviors** were **exacerbated** in children with ID as **demonstrated in other studies** [1, 4].

- These behaviors may be related to the use of emotion-focused coping strategies by parents given their moderate level of perceived stress.

However, **unlike other studies** [1, 2], **parental stress** did **not increase in relation** to the increase in **problem behaviors**.

- It is possible that their children's problem behaviors were **already present prior** to the pandemic and that the exacerbation of these behaviors was **not sufficient** to increase parents' already moderate stress;
- It would be **interesting to explore** other factors that could influence the stress of parents of children with ID, such as **reduced social support** in the context of a pandemic.

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Acknowledgment

We would like to thank the *Chaire de déficience intellectuelle et troubles du comportement* and *Institut Universitaire en Déficience Intellectuelle et en Trouble du Spectre de l'Autisme* for their financial support.

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Note[1]: The modified version of the BPI-01 asks parents if they have perceived improvement (+1), deterioration (-1) or no change (0) in their child, among nine challenging behavior domains, over the past six months within the context of the pandemic.