

## Parenting Stress in Families of LD Children: A Demographical Analysis

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### Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.08.117>

The main objective of this study was to identify the level of stress among the parents of LD children. The data was obtained from the Perceived Stress Scale, which is a self-report scale that involved 120 parents. The findings indicated that a total of 37 (33.6%) parents experiencing stress at low level (M=1.00-2.33) and they are in the state of normal. Whilst 52 (47.3%) of the parents were suffering moderate level of stress (M= 2.34-3.66) which is considered as mild. Furthermore, the analysis indicated that only 21 (19.1%) of them experienced high level of stress (M=3.67-5.00) which is classified as severe. The findings also shown that mothers of LD children was associated with higher stress. Parents of high SES experienced more stress than parents of low SES. The results also indicated that there seem to be no significant differences in the level of stress between the ethnic groups such as Malay, Chinese, Indian and religious groups that those who were Muslim, Christians, Buddhist and Hindus.

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**Keywords:** Stress; LD children; ethnic; religious.

### 1. Background

Children with learning disabilities (LD) refers to those who have disorders that can affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding and the use of verbal and non-verbal information (Dzalani & Shamsuddin, 2014). These disabilities are resulted from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning (Abbott & Heslop, 2009). However, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has categorized the LD children as those who have mild and moderate disabilities and therefore they should be given opportunity to be enrolled in inclusive program in mainstream schools (Supiah, Abd Hamid & Ismail (2014). Several studies done in the

United States showed that many parents of disabled children experienced stress at a high level (Lopez et al., 2008). This situation needs to be addressed because the excessive amounts of stress may lead to bodily harm. Furthermore, the increase in stress may cause to the problems such as heart attacks, ulcers, mental illness and also stroke.

Malaysia as a country of multi-ethnic society in which every of them practicing their own way of life. West Malaysia or better known as Peninsular Malaysia, the most populous ethnic groups are Malay, Chinese and Indian. In Malaysia, the majority Malays are Muslim, while the Chinese are Buddhists and the Indians are Hindus. However, approximately 10% of the population is Christian, which consists of several ethnic groups such as Chinese and Indians. Looking at this background it is most likely affect the level of stress among them. In addition, the Malaysian society is characterized by a variety of socio-economic status (SES). This condition can also affect the level of stress among parents. Hence, this paper was written with the assumption that the background of demographic differences among the parents of LD children may affect their level of stress.

## **2. Methodology**

Based on the objectives of the study, the researchers decided to conduct a cross-sectional study in which it was carried out at rehabilitation centers and school that provided inclusive program. The study was conducted in the state of Perak, located in Peninsular Malaysia. For this study, the respondents involved were 110 parents of LD children and they were chosen from various backgrounds. Perak was chosen because of its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society which comprised of three main ethnic groups such Malay, Chinese and Indian. The location is suitable for the study to be conducted because of its multi-religious society that comprises Muslim, Buddhists, Christians and Hindus.

As for this study the instrument used to assess the level of stress was adapted from Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen (1989) and it was validated by the experts in the field of educational psychology. The Bahasa Malaysia version of the instrument was given to the participants. The response format for the questionnaire was strongly agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Uncertain (U), Disagreed (D) and Strongly disagreed (SD). Based on the mean score, the researcher developed interpretation to classify the level of high ( $M = 3.67 - 5.00$ ), moderate ( $M = 2.34 - 3.66$ ) and low ( $M = 1.00 - 2.33$ ).

For the purpose of data collection, the parents of LD children were interviewed and they were requested to provide information pertaining their demographic background such as ethnic, religious practices, household income, parental education, and indirectly they also were requested to give response to the item- items contained in the questionnaire.

## **3. Findings**

### *3.1 The Level of Parental Stress*

The level of parental stress is shown in Table 1 which is based on the response of respondents involved. The analysis indicated that a total 24 (20.0%) parents experiencing stress at high level ( $M = 3.67-5.00$ ) and they are in the state of unfavorable.

**Table 1.** Level of Parental Stress

Variable	Mean Score	S.D.	Level of Stress	Range	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Stress among the parents	3.01		Low	1.00 – 2.33	40	33.3%
			Moderate	2.34 – 3.66	56	46.7%
			High	3.67 – 5.00	24	20.0%

Meanwhile, a total of 56 (46.7%) parents of LD children were suffering moderate level of stress (M=2.34-3.66) and it can be considered as mild level of stress. Furthermore, the analysis also indicated that a total 40 (33.3%) of the respondents experienced a low level of stress, and they can categorized as they were in normal state.

### 3.2 The Level of Parental Stress Based on Demographic Background

As shown in Table 2 is the level of stress among the parents based on their family background. The family background characteristics that were taken into account for this study were parents of gender, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status (SES).

As seen in Table 2 is the level of stress among mothers of children with LD are higher compared to the fathers. The analysis shows that 70.8% of mothers scored at high level of stress and only 29.2% are fathers. However, at the low level of stress, the result shows that there only 40.0% parents are mothers compared to fathers (60.0%) indicating they are more than mothers.

**Table 2.** Level of Stress According to Demographic Background

	Mean Score		
	1.00 - 2.33	2.34 - 3.66	3.67 – 5.00
<b>Gender</b>			
Mother (n=69)	16 (40.0%)	36 (64.3%)	17 (70.8%)
Father (n=51)	24 (60.0%)	20 (35.7%)	7 (29.2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>40 (100%)</b>	<b>56 (100%)</b>	<b>24 (100%)</b>
<b>Ethnic</b>			
Malay (n=56)	18 (45.0%)	31 (55.4%)	7 (29.2%)
Chinese (n=24)	8 (20.0%)	7 (12.5%)	9 (37.5%)
Indian (n=40)	14 (35.0%)	18 (32.1%)	8 (33.3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>40 (100%)</b>	<b>56 (100%)</b>	<b>24 (100%)</b>
<b>Religious Group</b>			
Islam (n=58)	19 (47.5%)	34 (60.7%)	5 (20.8%)
Christian (n=14)	4 (10.0%)	5 (8.9%)	5 (20.8%)
Buddhist (n=18)	6 (15.0%)	5 (8.9%)	7 (29.2%)
Hindus (n=30)	11 (27.5%)	12 (21.4%)	7 (29.2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>40 (100%)</b>	<b>56 (100%)</b>	<b>24 (100%)</b>
<b>SES</b>			
High (n=33)	13 (32.5%)	7 (12.5%)	13 (54.1%)
Middle (n=43)	9 (22.5%)	27 (48.2%)	7 (29.2%)
Low (n=44)	18 (45.0%)	22 (39.3%)	4 (16.7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>40 (100%)</b>	<b>56 (100%)</b>	<b>24 (100%)</b>

The table 2 also demonstrates the findings on the level of parental based on ethnic differences. The findings shows that the level of stress of Malay parents are better than the Chinese and Indian parents. Analysis found that there is only 29.2% Malay parents are at the score of high level of stress while 37.5% Chinese parents and 33.3% Indian parents. While, at the moderate level of stress, the results

indicated that 55.4% is Malay parents, Chinese parents 12.5% and 32.1% Indian parents. Furthermore, at the low level of stress, the findings indicated that 45.0% is found to be Malay parents and 18.9% Chinese parents and 35.0% Indian parents.

In the case of religious groups in Malaysia, the results indicated that stress at high level seems to be dominated by the parents who are Hindu and Buddhist and both with a total of 29.2% respectively. The result also revealed that a total of 20.8% Christians parents and also 20.8% are Muslim parents were experiencing high levels of stress. Meanwhile, comparing parental stress at moderate level, the findings showed that it is dominated by the parents who are Muslim with 60.7% followed by those who are Hindus (21.4%), Christians (8.9%) and also Buddhist (8.9%). Besides, comparing parental stress at low levels, the findings showed it also dominated by the Muslim parents with 47.5% followed by the parents who are are Hindus (27.5%), the Buddhist parents (15.0%) and the Christian parents (10.0%).

Referring to the stress based on SES, the findings indicated that stress at high level was dominated by the parent of high SES (54.1%) followed by those who are middle SES (29.2%) and only 16.7% are from among those who are low SES who suffer from such kind of emotional disorders. In contrast, at the average level of stress, it was dominated by the parents of middle SES (48.2%), followed by those low SES parents (39.3%) and high SES parents (12.5%). On the other hand, parents of low SES (45.0%) suffered from low levels of stress and it is followed by high SES parents (32.5%) and middle SES parents (22.5%).

#### **4. Discussion**

As a whole, the findings showed that the number of parents who has LD children suffering high levels of stress are very few (19.1%). However, this problem should also be handled because it disturbs a person well-being. Based on Cohen (1989) evidence, those who suffered from psychological disorders particularly high stress is associated with high blood pressure, higher BMI, larger waist to hip ratio, shorter the length of telomeres, high level of cortisol, immune dysfunction, difficulty falling asleep, and tend to use alcohol drinking. According Dervislij (2013) those who experiencing high levels of emotional disturbances include stress can be associated with subjective factors such as feelings of social isolation and are not motivated in life. Similarly to a study done by Supiah, Abd Hamid and Ismail (2014) parents of LD children experiencing various challenges in life such as repeated physical and emotional disturbances, communication within the family family, do not follow time and rules, and wasteful spending, which can cause financial problems and emotional distress in the family. Having a child with LD often requires reorganized and retooling of family goals, interaction and self-responsibilities.

According Nevid, Rathus & Greene (2011) a person who feel a little bit stress is normal and beneficial because it helps a person to act. A little bit stress or low level of stress is regarded as positive stress or eustress and it helps to improve the psychological well-being. At the same time it also plays an important factor in motivation and adaptability to response with the environment. In other word, those who have low levels of stress and the average stress was regarded as positive stress or eustress. This study shows that 47.3% of parents of children LD has experienced moderate stress levels and a

total of 33.6% of them suffer from stress at a low level. This findings imply that the positive stress prevailing the parents of LD children in Malaysia society.

The findings of this study reveal that the level of stress of mothers of LD children are higher compared to fathers. With this, this findings are in common with previous studies such as Hastings et al., (2005); Oelofsen and Richardson (2006); Gray (2003) which states emotional disorder is more than fathers mothers who have children with disabilities. Accordingly, fathers feel that their child's condition did not affect them personally as it did with their wives. According to Gray (2003) different levels of stress experienced by mothers and fathers depend on gender roles, level of SES and parental nurturing styles. Although mothers are usually more involved in bringing up children while fathers are more focused on working to meet the financial needs of the family. Thus, there is a difference between mothers and fathers in the coping strategies they use. Most likely, fathers tend to repress their own feelings and not always at home while the mothers are always with their children. Besides, mothers are more likely to experience a range of feelings such as sadness, denial, anger, sadness and various stress disorders. Mothers also tend to be more discriminated against by the disruption of their child (Gray, 2003). According to Lopez et al. (2008), mothers seem to be more vulnerable to stress associated with behavioral problems of their children. The findings seem to be supported by Gupta and Singh (2010) found that mothers that are in a more stress of having to balance the need of child care with their household chores. As fathers are typically the search of sustenance for their familiy and in Malaysian culture, having a child with LD can impose further financial pressures on fathers. Due to the social stigma against people with disabilities, parents may feel ashamed and embarrassed to take their children to social occasions and family. This can cause to social isolation for the whole family which can lead to stress.

Malaysia adalah sebuah negara berbilang kaum yang terdiri daripada tiga kumpulan utama di negara ini iaitu orang Melayu yang beragama Islam, membentuk kumpulan majoriti di negara ini. Kedua-dua kumpulan kaum utama lain adalah Cina, yang kebanyakannya Buddha dan India yang kebanyakannya Hindu. Dari segi etnik, dapatan menunjukkan bahawa tahap stres di kalangan ibu bapa Melayu lebih baik daripada ibu bapa Cina dan India. Ini dapat dilihat bahawa hanya 28.6% ibu bapa Melayu berada pada skor tahap stres yang tinggi manakala ibu bapa Cina 38.1% dan 33.3% ibu bapa India. Pada tahap yang sederhana tekanan Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa 57.7% adalah ibu bapa Melayu, ibu bapa Cina 9.6% dan 32.7% ibu bapa India. Dan pada tahap yang rendah tekanan, penemuan menunjukkan bahawa 45.9% didapati ibu bapa Melayu dan 18.9% ibu bapa Cina dan 35.2% ibu bapa India. Here we can summarize it seem significantly high proportion of Chinese and Indian parents had high levels of stress compared to Malay parents.

To some extent, this study also clarified the relationship between the religious beliefs of parents in Malaysia and their stress level. This situation can be seen from the analysis despite high levels of stress seems to be dominated by parents Christian and Buddhist both with a total of 28.6% respectively but it is not much difference as can be seen in the results of Hindu parents with 23.7% and 19.1% are Muslim parents experiencing high levels of stress. However, stress at the moderate level of stress it is dominated by Muslim parents followed with 63.4%, followed by Hindu parents (21.4%), Christian parents (7.6%) and parents Buddha as well (7.6%). Nevertheless, the stress at the low level it is

dominated by Muslim parents with 51.4%, followed by Hindu parents (27.1%), parents Buddha (13.4) and Christian parents (8.1%). A study done by Gupta, Mehrotra, and Mehrotra (2012) supports this situation where more than half of the respondents who have disabled children turned to mosques and temples after receiving treatment and advice given by the doctors that there was "no hope" to heal. Farheen et al, (2008); Gupta, (2011) reported that parents are often relieved with reconciliation of religion and surrender to the will of God when faced with problems that cannot be controlled. Overall, the findings proves that high levels is not related to parents' religious differences.

Among the SES groups the analysis shows that parents of high SES (57.5%) dominated the high level of stress when compared with medium (26.6%) and low SES group (14.3%). As a study done by Gupta, Mehrotra & Mehrotra (2012), parents involved in the work of the more lucrative and prestigious has more stress than parents who are involved in less prestigious and lucrative job regardless of their income. Apparently study Gupta & Kaur (2010) supports this by stating those who were working as professionals, managers and small businesses having a higher pressure than those working as laborers and clerks, affected the efficiency of the work, a limited role in various social activities , marital conflict, lack of social support and emotional disorders. Therefore, these findings is in contrast to studies that reported a higher stress among low SES parents. In this respect, Duncan et al. (1972) reported that higher stress among parents who are involved in the work of the prestigious and this is because those have high hopes for their children. They also feel embarrassed and disappointed not to be able to recover their children and the condition causes them restricted to involved in social and professional activities. Therefore, the findings is in contrast to studies that reported a higher stress among low SES parents.

## **5. Conclusion**

Although the study was conducted in Perak but it gave an overview of the state of stress experienced by parents of LD children in Malaysia. This study also demonstrates that the number of parents who are experiencing high level of stress is very small. Nevertheless, this problem need also to be addressed in order to foster the well-being of the disadvantaged group. Like other previous studies, this study also found that the level of stress among the fathers was even better as compared as compared to mothers. Parents of high SES experienced more stress than parents of low SES. Based on analysis done, it seems that as if there is no significant different in terms of stress level between the ethnic groups in Malaysia such as Malays, Chinese and Indians and religious groups such as Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus. Nevertheless, in the normal life of small amounts of stress is necessary, beneficial, and even healthy. Psychologists described it as positive stress or eustress which will help to improve psychological well-being. In other words, it plays a factor in motivation, adaptation, and reaction to the environment. Therefore, there will be critical roles for parents in coping their emotional problems. At the same time, various parties especially the government agencies such as Special Education Department and Department of Social Welfare need to design and plan programs to help the parents who are considered less fortunate by providing various welfare services such as counseling, the interpersonal skills for their well-being.

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