AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE COPING RESOURCES OF PARENTS WITH AUTISTIC CHILDREN.

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They think I’m perfect when they see me.
I cry on cue. I move my arms and legs.
My fingers and toes both add up to ten.
Their specialists tick all the columns on
their rating scale. They won’t find out.
None of the tests they run will show my
secret.

My subtle imperfection will complicate the
lives of everyone who loves me.

From Kaleidoscope
By Barbara Erasmus

ABSTRACT

The diagnosis of a serious disability brings many changes to the family of the newly diagnosed member. Each type of disability and each child is unique. The characteristics of autism make raising an autistic child challenging and places great stress on the family. The diagnosis of autism therefore presents the family with a great deal of unique challenges. Coping is necessary for the maintenance of the family and for the quality of life to remain intact for the individual family members. Traditionally the emphasis has been on treating the autistic child. However, recently more attention has been devoted to providing supportive and counselling services to the families of autistic children. Research has shifted its focus towards identifying those resources that enable the family to cope successfully in the face of chronic stress. The present study used the process model of stress and coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984) to examine the variables that may alleviate parental stress. These variables include both personal and socio-ecological coping resources, for example, personality variables, parenting skills, previous coping skills, social support and support from formal agencies. The sample selected consisted of 31 parents of autistic children. The parents were recruited through schools that cater specifically to autistic children and the parents were all volunteer participants. The results indicated that intervention and parent education levels are associated with the level of stress experienced by parents of autistic children. These results highlight the need for family-based intervention programmes that are specifically tailored to suit the needs of the family being helped. Without adequate services, it is unlikely that any amount of psychosocial support will be able to prevent family stress.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work, and has not been submitted to any other institution in fulfillment of any other degree.

_____ _____

Bianca Katz Date

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