

Research Highlights

Topic: Positive Perceptions of Disability

Behr, S.K., & Murphy, D.L. (1993). Research progress and promise: The role of perceptions in cognitive adaptation to disability. In A.P. Turnbull, J.A. Patterson, S.K. Behr, D.L. Murphy, J.G. Marquis, & M.J. Blue-Banning (Eds.), *Cognitive coping, families, and disability* (pp. 151-163). Baltimore: Brookes.

BOTTOM LINE

Family stress and coping theory and cognitive adaptation theory were used as a framework to develop measures for the assessment of perceptions and to investigate their relationship to successful coping outcomes. Over 1,200 birth parents, foster and adoptive parents, and legal guardians of children with disabilities participated in the national construct validity study. Factor analysis identified the underlying dimensions of four perceptions associated with cognitive adaptation. Additionally, data revealed variability in perceptions, stress, and well-being, with participants reporting stress and well-being levels similar to those of adults in the general population.

TIPS

- Focus on the beneficial qualities of a difficult situation and engage in active coping efforts that foster positive changes related to adjustment or adaptation:
- Find positive meaning from a negative experience, with the negative experience serving as a catalyst to restructure your life along more meaningful lines.
- Gain mastery or control by believing that you can take active steps to control directly the course of the event or to prevent it from recurring.
- Enhance self-esteem is a means of minimizing feelings of victimization, perceiving instead that the impact of the event has been small or that one has profited from it.
- Review the manual entitled *Coping with the Challenges of Disability* for a workshop guide for families related to enhancing the four positive perceptions.

KEY FINDINGS

- Families differ in their responses to stressful events, such as having a child with a disability. The family's perception or definition of the event is one factor influencing these differential responses.
- The work of this research is based on the cognitive adaptive theory. Four questionnaires were developed related to the cognitive themes of this theory:
 - ◆ Positive contributions: Construing positive contributions for the parent and family from the experience of having and raising a child with a disability.
 - ◆ Attributing a cause: Attributing a cause for the child's disability.
 - ◆ Mastery or control: Believing that one has direct or indirect control over short- and long-term outcomes for the child with a disability.
 - ◆ Social comparisons: Comparing oneself favorably, unfavorably, or similarly with others.
- The main focus of this study was to identify the underlying dimensions of four perceptions associated with cognitive adaptation.
- The factor analysis of the data supported the hypotheses that each of the four perceptions associated with cognitive adaptation are a cluster of related perceptions.
 - ◆ The factor analysis identified:
 - ◆ nine different dimensions of positive contributions (e.g., happiness and fulfillment)
 - ◆ five dimensions of causal attributions (e.g., special purpose)
 - ◆ four dimensions of mastery or control over outcomes (e.g., personal control)
 - ◆ four dimensions of social comparisons (e.g., similar comparisons).
- A secondary purpose of the study was to explore relationships between parental perceptions and measures of stress and family well-being.
 - ◆ Data revealed a great deal of variability in perceptions, stress and well-being among the parents sampled. They reported stress and well-being levels similar to those of adults in the general population.
 - ◆ Patterns in relationships between the measures of perceptions and the outcomes varied, depending on the particular outcome studied.
 - ◆ Different perceptions were significantly related to the measure of satisfaction with family relations.
- The set of perceptions measured and explored in this study had only a modest relationship with stress and family well-being which suggests the need to look further to identify factors critically related to these outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS cont.

- These perceptions consistently had a stronger relationship with the outcomes than family variables traditionally studied in this connection (e.g., age of child, severity of child's disability, parents' marital status, family income, and education).
-

METHOD cont.

- Questionnaires were developed related to four perceptions: positive contributions, social comparisons, attributing a cause, and mastery or control.
 - The questionnaires were tested on a regional sample of almost 400 parents and then revised.
 - The revised questionnaires were mailed to parents and legal guardians of children with disabilities nationwide for the purpose of validating the instruments.
 - Over 1,200 parents and legal guardians participated in the national study.
 - A factor analysis was conducted on participant responses to the four questionnaires.
 - For the purpose of exploring the relationship between the measures of perceptions and outcome measures of family well-being and stress, participants also completed two outcome measures normed on ordinary, well-functioning adults: The Family APGAR (Smilkstein, 1978) and the Comprehensive Computerized Stress Inventory (Press & Osterkamp, 1986).
-

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

- Blue-Banning, M. J., Santelli, B., Guy, B., & Wallace, J. (1994). *Coping with the challenges of disability*. Lawrence: University of Kansas, Beach Center on Families and Disability.
- Summers, J.A., Behr, S.K., & Turnbull, A.P. (1988). Positive adaptation and coping strengths of families who have children with disabilities. In G.H.S. Singer & L.K. Irvin (Eds.), *Support for caregiving families: Enabling positive adaptation to disability* (pp. 27-40). Baltimore: Brookes.
- Vohs, J. (1993). On belonging: A place to stand, a gift to give. In A.P. Turnbull, J.A. Patterson, S.K. Behr, D.L. Murphy, J.G. Marquis, & M.J. Blue-Banning (Eds.), *Cognitive coping, families, and disability* (pp. 151-163). Baltimore: Brookes.
-

This research was conducted by the Beach Center on Disability. It was funded by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Families of Children with Disabilities of the National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation and Research (H133B80046) and private endowments. For more information, contact the Beach Center on Disability at 1200 Sunnyside Avenue, 3111 Haworth Hall, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-7534. Phone: 785-864-7600. Email: Beachcenter@ku.edu. Website: www.beachcenter.org.

Permission granted to reproduce and distribute this research brief.
Please credit the Beach Center on Disability.