KMAN PUBLISHING INSTITUTE
Journal Website

Article history:
Received 02 November 2023
Revised 11 December 2023
Accepted 16 December 2023
Published online 01 January 2024

Psychological Research in Individuals with Exceptional Needs

Volume 2, Issue 1, pp 21-28

E-ISSN: 3060-6713

Parenting Strategies for Children with Developmental Delays: A Qualitative Study on Single Parents

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A r t i c l e I n f o

Article type:
Original Research

How to cite this article:
Hojjati, M., & Mehdiabadi, P. (2024). Parenting Strategies for Children with Developmental Delays: A Qualitative Study on Single Parents. *Psychological Research in Individuals with Exceptional Needs*, *2*(1), 21-28.
https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.prien.2.1.4

A B S T R A C T

This study aimed to explore the parenting strategies, support systems, and coping mechanisms employed by single parents of children with developmental delays. A qualitative research design was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with 23 single parents of children aged 2 to 12 years with diagnosed developmental delays. Participants were recruited through local support groups, online forums, and pediatric clinics. The data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's framework, was used to identify key themes and subthemes within the data. The study identified three main themes: parenting strategies, support systems, and coping mechanisms. Key parenting strategies included routine establishment, positive reinforcement, adaptive techniques, communication strategies, and behavior management. Support systems encompassed family support, professional support, community resources, and financial assistance. Coping mechanisms highlighted were emotional resilience, social networks, personal time management, seeking knowledge, advocacy and empowerment, spirituality, and adaptability. Participants emphasized the importance of structured routines and positive reinforcement in managing their children's needs, while family and professional support were crucial in alleviating caregiving burdens. Effective coping mechanisms were essential for managing stress and maintaining well-being. Single parents of children with developmental delays employ a variety of effective strategies and support systems to navigate their unique challenges. Emotional resilience and social support networks play a critical role in their ability to cope with the demands of caregiving. These findings underscore the need for tailored interventions and resources to support single-parent families, highlighting the importance of flexible services, community resources, and advocacy efforts. Further research should focus on larger, more diverse samples and explore the impact of technological tools in supporting these parents.

Keywords: *Single parents, developmental delays, parenting strategies, support systems, coping mechanisms, thematic analysis, emotional resilience, community resources, advocacy.*

1. Introduction

Raising a child with developmental delays presents unique challenges and requires specialized strategies, particularly for single parents who often lack the support system available in two-parent households. Developmental delays, which can include a range of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional delays, necessitate tailored parenting approaches to foster the child's development effectively (Brumariu & Kerns, 2022; Chung et al., 2010; Guo et al., 2024; Ng et al., 2021; Taliei & Moataghedi Fard, 2024).

Parental involvement is crucial in the development and well-being of children with developmental delays. Parents are often the primary advocates and caregivers, playing a pivotal role in implementing therapeutic interventions and fostering an environment conducive to their child's growth (Lin et al., 2018). Studies have shown that active parental participation in therapy sessions can significantly improve outcomes for children with developmental delays (Bagner, 2013; Bagner & Graziano, 2012; Lin et al., 2018). Moreover, parents who are well-informed and engaged are better equipped to address their children's unique needs and to advocate for necessary services (McIntyre, 2008).

Single parents of children with developmental delays face numerous challenges that can impact their ability to provide optimal care. These challenges include financial constraints, limited access to support systems, and increased stress levels. Financial burdens are a significant concern, as therapies and specialized services for children with developmental delays can be costly (Bagner & Graziano, 2012). Additionally, single parents often have fewer opportunities for respite, leading to higher levels of caregiver burnout and stress (Rehm & Bradley, 2005). The lack of a co-parent to share responsibilities can exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult for single parents to balance work, caregiving, and self-care (Cprek et al., 2015).

Research highlights several effective strategies that single parents can employ to manage the demands of raising a child with developmental delays. Routine establishment is one such strategy, providing structure and predictability that can help reduce anxiety and improve behavior in children with developmental delays (Ciciolla et al., 2013). Positive reinforcement techniques, such as rewards and praise, are also beneficial in encouraging desired behaviors and promoting a positive parent-child relationship (Baker & Crnic, 2009).

Adaptive techniques tailored to the child's specific needs are crucial. This includes modifying activities to suit the child's developmental level and using specialized communication strategies, such as visual aids or sign language, to enhance understanding (Chung et al., 2010). Behavior management strategies, including timeouts and redirection, are essential tools for addressing challenging behaviors effectively (Paczkowski & Baker, 2007).

Support systems play a critical role in the well-being of single parents and their children with developmental delays. Family members, such as grandparents and siblings, often provide essential emotional and practical support (Armstrong et al., 2020). Professional support from therapists, pediatricians, and special educators is also vital, offering guidance and interventions tailored to the child's needs (McIntyre, 2008). Community resources, including support groups and local programs, provide a sense of

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belonging and access to additional support (Cprek et al., 2015).

Financial assistance from government programs and charities can alleviate some of the financial burdens associated with caring for a child with developmental delays (Bagner & Graziano, 2012). These resources are particularly important for single parents, who may struggle to cover the costs of necessary therapies and services on a single income.

Developing effective coping mechanisms is essential for single parents managing the stresses associated with raising a child with developmental delays. Emotional resilience, which includes stress management techniques and maintaining a positive outlook, is crucial for coping with daily challenges (Kurtz-Nelson & McIntyre, 2017). Building social networks with friends, online communities, and peer support groups can provide emotional and practical support, reducing feelings of isolation (Rehm & Bradley, 2005).

Personal time management, including setting aside time for self-care and relaxation, helps parents maintain their well-being and prevent burnout (Baker & Crnic, 2009). Seeking knowledge through research, workshops, and seminars equips parents with the skills and information needed to support their child's development effectively (Lin et al., 2018).

Advocacy and empowerment are also important coping strategies. Parents who become advocates for their children, gaining legal knowledge and participating in advocacy groups, often feel more empowered and capable of navigating the challenges associated with developmental delays (Zuckerman et al., 2015). Spiritual and religious practices can provide additional comfort and strength, offering a sense of community and support (Kurtz-Nelson & McIntyre, 2017).

The rationale for this study stems from the need to fill gaps in the literature regarding the specific challenges and strategies employed by single parents. While existing research has extensively explored parenting strategies for children with developmental delays, there is limited focus on the unique experiences of single parents (Bagner, 2013; Ciciolla et al., 2013). This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategies, support systems, and coping mechanisms utilized by single parents, contributing valuable insights to the field.

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

- What are the most effective parenting strategies employed by single parents of children with developmental delays?
- What support systems do single parents utilize, and how do these systems impact their caregiving experience?
- What coping mechanisms do single parents develop to manage the challenges associated with raising a child with developmental delays?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study aimed to explore and understand the parenting strategies employed by single parents of children with developmental delays. The research adopted an exploratory design to gain deep insights into the lived experiences and coping mechanisms of these parents. Participants were single parents, both mothers and fathers, who have a child diagnosed with a developmental delay. Recruitment was conducted through local support groups, online forums, and pediatric clinics specializing in developmental disorders.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure a diverse representation of single parents from various socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and educational levels. The inclusion criteria required participants to be the primary caregiver of a child aged between 2 and 12 years, diagnosed with a developmental delay, and willing to participate in the study. A total of 20 participants were included, with recruitment continuing until theoretical saturation was achieved—when no new themes or insights were emerging from the data.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility to explore topics in depth while maintaining consistency across interviews. An interview guide was developed, consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about parenting strategies, challenges faced, support systems, and coping mechanisms.

Interviews were conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on the participant's preference and convenience. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. The interview guide covered topics such as:

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- Daily routines and parenting strategies
- Perceived challenges and stressors
- Sources of support and resources
- Impact of single parenthood on caregiving
- Adaptations and coping mechanisms

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis. The process involved several stages:

Familiarization with the Data: Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were read multiple times to immerse in the data and gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

Generating Initial Codes: Initial codes were generated systematically across the entire data set. This involved identifying meaningful segments of text and assigning labels that capture key aspects of the data.

Searching for Themes: Codes were then grouped into potential themes, and relevant data extracts were collated within each theme. This stage involved analyzing the relationships between codes and how they could be organized into coherent themes.

Reviewing Themes: Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represent the data. This involved checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, ensuring a good fit between data and themes.

Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was defined clearly, outlining its scope and focus. Themes were named to reflect their essence and the underlying patterns in the data.

Producing the Report: The final step involved selecting vivid, compelling examples from the data to illustrate each theme, and constructing a narrative that provides a coherent account of the findings.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, member checking was employed, where participants were given the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the preliminary findings. Additionally, peer debriefing with colleagues and advisors was conducted to ensure credibility and rigor in the analysis process.

3. Findings and Results

The study included a diverse group of 23 single parents who were the primary caregivers of children with developmental delays. The participants consisted of 17 mothers (74%) and 6 fathers (26%), reflecting the higher prevalence of single mothers in caregiving roles. The ages of the participants ranged from 25 to 50 years, with a mean age of 36 years. In terms of educational background, 10 participants (43%) had completed high school, 8 participants (35%) held a bachelor's degree, and 5 participants (22%) had attained a graduate degree. The socioeconomic status of the participants varied, with 9 (39%) reporting low income, 10 (43%) middle income, and 4 (18%) high income. Ethnic diversity was also represented, with 12 participants (52%) identifying as Caucasian, 5 (22%) as African American, 4 (17%) as Hispanic, and 2 (9%) as Asian. The children of the participants ranged in age from 2 to 12 years, with an average age of 6.5 years. The types of developmental delays included autism spectrum disorder (39%), ADHD (26%), speech and language delays (17%), and other developmental disorders (17%).

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Parenting Strategies	1.1 Routine Establishment	Consistency, Scheduling, Predictability
	1.2 Positive Reinforcement	Rewards, Praise, Encouragement
	1.3 Adaptive Techniques	Tailored Activities, Flexibility, Individualization
	1.4 Communication Strategies	Clear Instructions, Visual Aids, Sign Language
	1.5 Behavior Management	Timeout, Redirecting, Calm Down Techniques
2. Support Systems	2.1 Family Support	Extended Family, Sibling Involvement, Grandparents
	2.2 Professional Support	Therapists, Pediatricians, Special Educators
	2.3 Community Resources	Support Groups, Community Centers, Local Programs
	2.4 Financial Assistance	Government Aid, Charities, Grants
3. Coping Mechanisms	3.1 Emotional Resilience	Stress Management, Positive Thinking, Mindfulness
	3.2 Social Networks	Friends, Online Communities, Peer Support
	3.3 Personal Time Management	Self-Care, Hobbies, Relaxation Techniques
	3.4 Seeking Knowledge	Research, Workshops, Seminars
	3.5 Advocacy and Empowerment	Legal Knowledge, Advocacy Groups, Policy Involvement

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3.6 Spirituality and Religion	Faith Practices, Religious Community, Meditation
3.7 Adaptability	Flexibility, Problem-Solving, Innovation

3.1. Parenting Strategies

Routine Establishment: Single parents emphasized the importance of creating consistent daily routines for their children with developmental delays. Maintaining a predictable schedule helped reduce anxiety and improve their children's sense of security. One parent noted, "Having a set routine makes everything smoother. My child knows what to expect, which really helps with his anxiety." Concepts associated with this subtheme include consistency, scheduling, and predictability.

Positive Reinforcement: The use of positive reinforcement emerged as a critical strategy. Parents frequently used rewards, praise, and encouragement to promote desired behaviors and achievements. A participant shared, "I always make sure to praise him when he does something right. It motivates him to keep trying." The concepts here are rewards, praise, and encouragement.

Adaptive Techniques: Parents adapted their strategies to meet the individual needs of their children. This included tailoring activities and approaches to suit their child's abilities and interests. One parent explained, "I often modify games and learning activities to match his level. It keeps him engaged and makes learning fun." Concepts include tailored activities, flexibility, and individualization.

Communication Strategies: Effective communication was crucial for parents, who used clear instructions, visual aids, and sometimes sign language to enhance understanding. A parent mentioned, "Using visual schedules and picture cards helps my daughter understand what's happening next." Concepts within this subtheme are clear instructions, visual aids, and sign language.

Behavior Management: Managing challenging behaviors was a common concern. Parents employed techniques like timeouts, redirecting attention, and calm down strategies to address behavioral issues. One participant stated, "When he gets overwhelmed, I use a calm down corner where he can relax and regroup." Concepts include timeout, redirecting, and calm down techniques.

3.2. Support Systems

Family Support: Extended family members, such as grandparents and siblings, played a significant role in providing emotional and practical support. A parent remarked, "My parents are a huge help. They often babysit and give me a break." Concepts include extended family, sibling involvement, and grandparents.

Professional Support: Access to professionals like therapists, pediatricians, and special educators was vital. These professionals offered guidance, therapy, and interventions tailored to the child's needs. "Our therapist has been a lifesaver, giving us strategies to improve my son's communication skills," shared a participant. Concepts here are therapists, pediatricians, and special educators.

Community Resources: Parents benefited from community resources such as support groups, community centers, and local programs. These resources provided a sense of belonging and practical assistance. One parent explained, "Joining a local support group has been wonderful. I get advice and support from other parents in similar situations." Concepts include support groups, community centers, and local programs.

Financial Assistance: Many parents relied on financial assistance from government aid, charities, and grants to manage the costs associated with their child's care. A parent noted, "Receiving grants has been crucial for us to afford the necessary therapies and equipment." Concepts associated with this subtheme are government aid, charities, and grants.

3.3. Coping Mechanisms

Emotional Resilience: Developing emotional resilience was essential for parents to manage the stresses of caregiving. Strategies included stress management techniques, positive thinking, and mindfulness. One parent shared, "Practicing mindfulness helps me stay calm and present, even on tough days." Concepts include stress management, positive thinking, and mindfulness.

Social Networks: Building and maintaining social networks with friends, online communities, and peer support groups provided emotional and practical support. A parent mentioned, "Connecting with other parents online has been a great way to share experiences and advice." Concepts include friends, online communities, and peer support.

Personal Time Management: Allocating time for self-care, hobbies, and relaxation was crucial for parents' well-being. One participant explained, "I make sure to set aside some 'me time' every day to recharge." Concepts within this subtheme are self-care, hobbies, and relaxation techniques.

Seeking Knowledge: Parents actively sought knowledge through research, workshops, and seminars to better

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understand their child's condition and effective caregiving strategies. A parent noted, "Attending workshops on developmental delays has been really helpful in learning new techniques." Concepts include research, workshops, and seminars.

Advocacy and Empowerment: Many parents became advocates for their children, gaining legal knowledge, joining advocacy groups, and getting involved in policy discussions. One parent stated, "Being part of an advocacy group has empowered me to fight for better services for my child." Concepts include legal knowledge, advocacy groups, and policy involvement.

Spirituality and Religion: Spiritual and religious practices provided comfort and strength for some parents. Engaging in faith practices, being part of a religious community, and meditation were common strategies. A participant shared, "My faith and church community have been a source of great support and comfort." Concepts include faith practices, religious community, and meditation.

Adaptability: The ability to adapt and problem-solve was a key coping mechanism. Parents demonstrated flexibility and innovation in their approach to caregiving. One parent explained, "I try to stay flexible and find new solutions to challenges as they arise." Concepts within this subtheme are flexibility, problem-solving, and innovation.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the parenting strategies, support systems, and coping mechanisms utilized by single parents of children with developmental delays. The findings revealed that single parents employ a variety of strategies to manage their children's needs, including establishing routines, using positive reinforcement, adapting techniques to their child's abilities, implementing effective communication strategies, and managing behaviors through various approaches. Additionally, the study highlighted the critical role of support systems, encompassing family, professional, community resources, and financial assistance. Coping mechanisms identified included developing emotional resilience, building social networks, effective time management, seeking knowledge, advocating for their children, and utilizing spirituality.

The use of consistent routines was a prominent strategy among single parents, aligning with the literature that emphasizes the importance of structure for children with developmental delays (Ciciolla et al., 2013). Establishing routines provides predictability and security, reducing anxiety and enhancing behavioral outcomes. Positive reinforcement, another widely used strategy, has been supported by previous studies indicating its effectiveness in promoting desirable behaviors and fostering a positive parent-child relationship (Baker & Crnic, 2009).

Adaptive techniques, such as tailoring activities to the child's developmental level and using specialized communication strategies, were essential for addressing individual needs. These findings are consistent with Chung et al. (2010), who noted that tailored interventions are crucial for children with developmental delays (Chung et al., 2010). The use of visual aids and sign language to enhance communication aligns with Lin et al. (2018), highlighting the importance of clear and accessible communication methods (Lin et al., 2018).

Behavior management strategies, including timeouts and redirection, were commonly employed to address challenging behaviors. Paczkowski and Baker (2007) found similar results, emphasizing the need for effective behavior management techniques to improve daily functioning and reduce stress for both parents and children (Paczkowski & Baker, 2007).

Family support emerged as a vital resource, with extended family members providing emotional and practical assistance. This finding is in line with Armstrong et al. (2020), who identified the critical role of family support in alleviating the caregiving burden (Armstrong et al., 2020). Professional support from therapists, pediatricians, and special educators was also highlighted as essential, corroborating McIntyre (2008) who emphasized the importance of professional guidance in managing developmental delays (McIntyre, 2008).

Community resources, including support groups and local programs, provided a sense of belonging and practical help. Cprek et al. (2015) similarly noted the benefits of community resources in supporting parents and reducing isolation (Cprek et al., 2015). Financial assistance from government programs and charities was crucial for managing the costs associated with care, echoing Bagner and Graziano (2012), who highlighted the financial challenges faced by families of children with developmental delays (Bagner & Graziano, 2012).

Emotional resilience was a key coping mechanism, with parents employing stress management techniques, positive thinking, and mindfulness. Kurtz-Nelson and McIntyre (2017) found that emotional resilience significantly impacts the well-being of parents of children with developmental delays (Kurtz-Nelson & McIntyre, 2017). Building social

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networks with friends, online communities, and peer support groups provided additional emotional and practical support, reducing feelings of isolation (Rehm & Bradley, 2005).

Personal time management, including setting aside time for self-care and relaxation, was essential for maintaining well-being. This finding aligns with Baker and Crnic (2009), who emphasized the importance of self-care in preventing caregiver burnout (Baker & Crnic, 2009). Seeking knowledge through research, workshops, and seminars was another critical strategy, supported by Lin et al. (2018), who highlighted the role of informed parents in advocating for and supporting their children effectively (Lin et al., 2018).

Advocacy and empowerment emerged as significant themes, with parents gaining legal knowledge and participating in advocacy groups to navigate challenges and fight for better services. Zuckerman et al. (2015) similarly found that advocacy efforts are crucial in securing timely and appropriate interventions for children with developmental delays (Zuckerman et al., 2015). Finally, spirituality and religious practices provided comfort and strength, offering a sense of community and support, consistent with prior findings (Kurtz-Nelson & McIntyre, 2017).

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, with 23 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. While the study aimed for diverse representation, the sample may not fully capture the experiences of all single parents of children with developmental delays. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews could introduce bias, as participants may present their experiences in a socially desirable manner. The qualitative nature of the study, while providing in-depth insights, also means that the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population without further quantitative validation.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by including larger, more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how parenting strategies, support systems, and coping mechanisms evolve over time. Additionally, quantitative studies could complement the qualitative findings, offering a broader understanding of the prevalence and effectiveness of different strategies and support systems. Exploring the perspectives of children with developmental delays could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of parenting strategies on their development and well-being.

Investigating the role of technology and digital resources in supporting single parents of children with developmental delays is another area for future research. As digital tools become increasingly prevalent, understanding their potential benefits and challenges could inform the development of new interventions and support systems. Finally, examining the impact of cultural and socioeconomic factors on parenting strategies and support systems could provide insights into how to tailor interventions to meet the needs of diverse populations.

Practitioners working with single parents of children with developmental delays should consider the findings of this study to inform their approaches and interventions. Providing tailored support and resources that address the unique challenges faced by single parents is crucial. This includes offering flexible and accessible services, such as in-home visits or telehealth options, to accommodate the demands of single-parent households.

Support groups and community resources should be actively promoted and made easily accessible, as they provide valuable emotional and practical support. Practitioners should also focus on educating parents about effective parenting strategies and coping mechanisms, emphasizing the importance of routines, positive reinforcement, and adaptive techniques. Training programs for professionals should include modules on the unique needs of single-parent families to enhance their ability to provide targeted and empathetic support.

Financial assistance programs should be expanded and streamlined to reduce the financial burden on single parents. Advocacy efforts are also crucial; practitioners should support parents in gaining legal knowledge and participating in advocacy groups to ensure they can secure the necessary services for their children. Finally, integrating spiritual and religious support into care plans, when appropriate, can provide additional comfort and community for parents.

In summary, this study underscores the resilience and resourcefulness of single parents of children with developmental delays. By understanding and addressing their unique challenges and needs, practitioners can better support these families, ultimately improving outcomes for both parents and children.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

E-ISSN: 3060-6713

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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E-ISSN: 3060-6713