

# I love them but they're driving me crazy : Stress in Mothers of Young Children

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**A** recent study which investigated the relationship between a range of measures of psychological wellbeing and stress in a group of 109 Melbourne mothers (Rodd, 1992), unearthed some surprising but not unexpected findings. In fact, the research into maternal stress was initiated following many years of working with parents, running parent support and education programs and discussions with a range of professionals who provide services for families. The end result of the examination of this observational and anecdotal evidence pointed to the fact that mothers of young children are stressed – not just slightly or moderately stressed – but experiencing extreme levels of emotional stress in relation to their parenting role!

The findings of the maternal wellbeing study supported the intuitions of child and family support professionals – despite reporting being 'pretty' to 'very' satisfied and happy with life in general, their home life, being a parent, their level of financial security, and that it would have been either 'extremely disappointing' or 'a tragedy' if they had not been able to have children, the sample of mothers revealed that they were extremely stressed about childrearing. The data bear out Eastman's (1983) findings from a review of 'normal families in Australia', which pointed to stress being widespread, with parents having little time and/or skills to draw upon coping strategies.

Stressed adults and adults who experience difficulties in coping with and adjusting to our apparently increasingly stressful society are not uncommon. Today, there are a range of endeavours on the part of professional

services for the prevention and treatment of emotional problems than ever before. For parents, such endeavours are usually in the form of provision of support services and opportunity for skilling and re-education through parent education programs. While parent support services usually provide a range of tangible forms of assistance, parent education programs have emphasised the importance of creating, building and improving parent-child relationships.

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Few programs have focused upon the mental health of parents and its consequences for children. While Bernard and Joyce (1984) pointed out that disturbed parenting styles can create problems in relatively normal children, few professionals have recognised that emotional stress in parents may lead to less effective interaction with and problem solving in relation to their children. Although parents themselves and many providers of parent education programs appear to have unsubstantiated confidence in the long-term benefits of parent education programs, it has been obvious to some professionals who work with parents, that the stress level of parents can prohibit parents from deriving much benefit from the skilling and educational approaches.

Before attempting to improve parent child relationships as a basis of more effective parenting, the issue of parental stress level needs to be addressed. Research findings (Rodd, 1992) have indicated that many mothers need assistance and support for them-

selves as people first before they can benefit from assistance with the parenting role.

There are many reasons why parenting can be experienced as a stressful experience. Research evidence (Goldstein and Ross, 1989; Rodd, 1992) suggests that adults who are unprepared for parenthood and the changes children bring to their lives are particularly vulnerable to the strain of parenting and are likely to experience high levels of stress. Changing patterns of family living with the demands for personal adjustment to new roles (such as from homemaker to breadwinner), the need for marital adjustment to accommodate children's needs and the requirement for work adaptation to respond to family and personal situations, all impact on mothers of young children and may explain why women are more prone to psychological stress than men (Umberson, 1989). In addition, while extended family support has not disappeared, it has diminished. Lack of help with household tasks and child care also impacts on the relationship between psychological wellbeing and parental stress.

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However, it must be recognised that parenting is not a static role (Umberson and Gove, 1989) and it may elicit contradictory feelings in mothers who can, at any given time, experience both positive and negative effects. While child rearing can be associated with strain as a result of individuals ability to cope with change and stress, contextual features, such as number of

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children, economic circumstances, marital status, employment, home help and support networks also influence perception of the role. Terry (1992) contends that levels of stress are influenced by the objective characteristics of a situation but also by numerous person and appraisal variables.

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Stressors are defined as events that are perceived or appraised by individuals as threats to their present sense of wellbeing. Events in themselves are not stressful but rather it is the individual's perception of the event and his/her ability to handle it which determines whether or not it is stressful. Therefore, maternal stress may be a factor related to mothers' beliefs about themselves, their parenting competence as well as their children and their children's behaviour. If this is the case, ameliorating maternal stress levels may be dependent upon teaching mothers to change their perception and attitudes about child-rearing as well as on providing other forms of support.

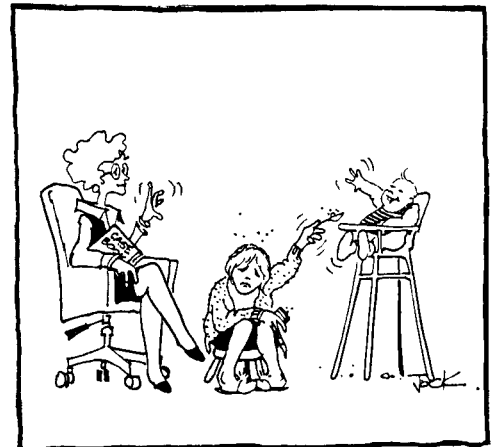
O'Brien (1991) identified several characteristics of vulnerable parents which can be applied to identify the stress potential of mothers of young children. Of particular relevance are lack of basic trust in others, feelings of powerlessness over their lives, pessimistic perception of life and crisis-ridden lifestyles. Lack of basic trust in others can lead to shouldering a disproportionate amount of responsibility for household tasks and child care as well as lack of participation in and use of support systems leading to social isolation. While meeting the needs of young children is physically demanding and time consuming, and therefore likely to result in lowered involvement in support networks, psychological hardiness and wellbeing tend to be associated with access to and participation in social support and social networks.

The maternal wellbeing Study (Rodd, 1992) indicated that of the numerous services provided for families with young children, the overwhelming majority of mothers were unaware of their existence and therefore did not make use of them. The lack of sharing of household tasks and child care plus the lack of knowledge about availability of support services contributed to the level of stress reported by the mothers. This is likely to be related to perceptions of powerlessness and pessimistic attitudes about life. Given their level of responsibility and lack of assistance, many mothers perceive that they have few chances and options for exercising control over their lives and create a pessimistic, problem-oriented point of view about life and childrearing. It is easy to comprehend how mothers may perceive their lives as crisis-ridden with the burden of parenting falling heaviest on mothers who often have too much work and too few resources to meet the demands of the parenting role (Scott & Alwin, 1989).

What then can be done to help mothers of young children who are experiencing high stress levels? Parenting programs have been regarded as one way of facilitating and strengthening relationships within the family. However, the majority of these programs have emphasised different approaches for working to improve parent-child relationships. Few programs have focused upon the state of mental health of the parents and its consequences for children.

In developing programs to assist parents, especially mothers, to develop their potential for cultivating satisfying relationships within the family, professionals need to look to enhancing psychological wellbeing before attempting to teach other information and skills. The first step is to help mothers recognise and acknowledge that most parents experience stress in relation to the parenting role. Some degree of stress appears to be part and parcel of contemporary parenting. However, it is essential that mothers understand that stress is not causal. In fact, people create their own stress from the way in which they perceive and interpret situations. Different

situations elicit stress responses in different people. In assisting mothers to become more self-determining and to take control in their lives, mothers need to be aware that what they have perceived and how they have chosen to perceive it is a choice not a reaction. In this way mothers can take an active role in acquiring a new perspective on perceived stress regarding one's parenting competency and other strains in life. Many mothers appear to create unnecessary stress for themselves from the way in which they construe the experience of parenting. Rather than viewing parenting as inherently stressful, mothers can learn to change their thinking and view the parenting role as offering positive opportunity for new learning and the development of new coping strategies which will enhance their personal development and adjustment as an adult.



It has been argued that irrational beliefs and unrealistic expectations about parenting may be a source of emotional stress in parents leading to ineffective interaction with children and perceived lack of competence in the parenting role (Bernard & Joyce, 1984). Adults who are experiencing stress often think illogically and draw specious conclusions in the appraisal of their perceptions. Programs which train mothers in cognitive restructuring, that is, a reorganisation of thinking, are likely to be helpful in stress reduction. Techniques which help the mother realise that it is her perception and interpretation of the event which is stressful, not the event itself, will assist mothers in managing their emotional reactions and behavioural

responses to the conduct of others. The fact that one has a choice about how one perceives, interprets and responds to any given situation is empowering. This can reduce feelings of helplessness where a mother comes to understand that, in changing one's perception, one alters the situation. A sense of confidence and control is gained from the sense of being able to act rather than a sense of being caught in a chain of reactive events.

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Another step in reducing stress in mothers is to help them take responsibility for their own behaviour. The demands of parenting are many and include personal adjustment to new roles, marital adjustment to incorporate children's needs and work adaptation to respond to new personal and family situations. Individuals who enter parenthood unprepared for the changes that children bring to their lives may be particularly vulnerable to the strains of parenting and experience high levels of stress.

In addition, children and parenthood are often idealised and romanticised in our society despite a diminishing recognition of the importance of motherhood as a central focus of identity for women. Women who are not adequately or realistically prepared for the changes that parenthood brings may need assistance to help them adjust to and cope with often conflicting demands. Professionals and prospective parents need to pay greater attention to the need for realistic preparation for parenthood, support and education during early parenthood and emphasis on personal abilities to cope with change and

stress in order to ameliorate the stress levels which are experienced by many mothers of young children in our society.

Social isolation has been associated with higher levels of emotional stress. While it is acknowledged that the demands and needs of young children reduce the likelihood of maternal involvement in social support networks, participation in and contribution to social support networks have implications for stress reduction. Social support includes emotional support involving the meeting of one's needs for intimacy, instrumental support involving the provision of direct aid and services and informational support involving advice concerning solutions to problems and feedback on behaviour. Therefore, belonging to a social support network can contribute to mothers' sense of empowerment and psychological well-being. Positive relationships with adults in other contexts can provide mothers with a more realistic perception of children and parenting and enhance a sense of confidence in parenting skills and optimism for meeting the challenges of child-rearing. Professionals need to emphasise the importance of social support networks, offer assistance with the establishment of such systems and encourage involvement in the networks as a type of buffer against stress.

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While women still appear to be shouldering a disproportionate amount of responsibility for household tasks and childrearing, it is likely that they will experience higher levels of stress in the family context than men. However, it is currently purported by a number of researchers that parental roles are changing with men becoming more involved in the responsibilities of childrearing. If this is so, an increase in paternal stress levels is

likely to be a result. This highlights the need for parent education and support programs to acknowledge the importance of and assist in facilitating the psychological wellbeing of parents, be they mothers or fathers. ♦

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