

**PERCEPTION OF WORKING MOTHERS ON NATURE  
OF STRESS IN SINGLE CHILD  
- A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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**Abstract:**

Trends like nuclear family set up, raising a single child and both parents working are emerging in metro cities in India. Though stress is being widely studied in adults, but the understanding about stress in childhood is still a less explored area. Therefore, the current study was done with the objective to understand the perception of working mother professionals about nature of stress in only child in a nuclear family. A sample of 15 working mother professionals was selected through purposive sampling from Bangalore city, India. A semi- structured interview method was used for in-depth interviews. Stress being a perceived phenomenon, interpretative phenomenological analysis was adopted to analyse the transcripts, with the help of ATLAS.TI 6.2 version. Results revealed that parents were not fully aware of the signs and symptoms of stress. The results are presented in themes under four broad domains- Psychological, Emotional, Physical and Cognitive signs. Based on such studies, modules for creating awareness about nature of stress in childhood can be developed for parents and teachers.

**Key words:** working mother, childhood stress, only child, nuclear family, qualitative.

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**Introduction:**

Stress is a perceived phenomenon and usually involves individual feelings, thoughts, behaviour and actions connected to the events that take place around one's lives. To each and every human being, stress is contextual and is manifested differently. Stress symptoms are defined as "both subtle and dramatic cognitive, emotional, and physical responses in the body that are often manifested as perceptible symptoms" (Ryan-Wenger et al, 2000). International Stress Management association (2014) in "How to Identify Stress" classified the signs and symptoms of stress under four domains - Psychological (examples include memory lapses, negative thinking), Emotional (examples include tearful, mood swings), Physical (examples include allergies, cold, dizziness) and Behavioural (examples include prone to accidents, absenteeism).

Nature of stress and coping; and effective stress management in children is a lesser explored area. Children can be stressed with not only major events or chronic strains but also daily life issues. The stress felt depends to a large extent on their cognitive appraisal or the meaning attached (Fallin et al, 2001). A study by Jackson (2009) used qualitative methods to determine whether kindergarten children exhibited stress behaviours during the academic work hours. Results showed that more than 50 % children exhibited some stress behaviours during the observations. The nature of childhood stress has changed significantly in the past decades. Some experts have observed new stressors emerging like being alone, tests, family fights, multiple things to do, and issues about friends (Ryan-Wenger, 2005). In an integrative review by Atkins (1991), it was concluded that in 7-12 years old children, the commonly identified stressful events were fear of negative evaluation, parental conflict or loss, and conflict with an adult. The way children manifest stress or cope with stress can be quite different from that of adults. Their ability to verbalize or express their stressful feelings is limited. As per an article by APA (2014), stress can manifest itself in children through behavioural changes like irritability, withdrawing from earlier enjoyable activities, often expressing worries, more complaints regarding school, crying, displaying fearful or angry responses, negative talk about self or others, clinging to a significant-other, change in the sleeping or eating patterns and also physical symptoms like stomach-aches or headaches. According to Jewett and Peterson (2002), teachers and parents can help children in understanding and using effective adaptation and coping strategies but these should be based on the child's developmental level and understanding of the stress-inducing

event. In Indian context, a survey with only child in different age groups revealed that a high percentage had a lot of 'anger' in them, probably because they've had to internalize a lot many things, not wanting to upset their parents (Medindia, 2008). Also, children of working mothers scored slightly higher than the children of non-working mothers on measures of achievement but more signs and symptoms of emotional disorders and interpersonal deficits were noticed (Sharma & Sharma, 2010). Dinesh (2010) researched on the prevalence of stress in school children aged 4-17 years, the interrelationship of stress and various areas like school-based competence, their attitudes and physical and health problems. The results showed a high percentage showed medium to moderate stress which correlated with many of the psychosomatic problems seen. Thus, in a fast emerging nuclear family concept in metros, often with both the parents working, and a rise in single-child families, research on parental perception about childhood stress can be very beneficial in developing appropriate awareness in them.

### Method

#### Objective

To explore the nature of childhood stress, as perceived by working mother professionals, in the only-child in the age group of 8-12 years, in a nuclear family set-up.

#### Sample size and sample selection:

A sample of 15 Working mother professionals were selected for the study through purposive sampling from Bangalore city, India. The inclusion criteria was "Working mothers, having a single child in the age group of 8 years to 12 years, living in a nuclear family set up". The exclusion criteria were "mothers working from home, part time job, living in a joint family".

**Instrument:** A semi- structured interview schedule was developed for in-depth interview of the participants. Procedure followed for development of the schedule was as follows: Firstly, Review of literature on "stress in childhood", "symptoms of stress in children in different ages", "factors affecting childhood stress", "parental awareness about stress in children" was done. Questions were framed in a non- rhetorical pattern where questions were open ended and non-directive. For example questions like "How is your child's peer interaction, how does he respond if he faces peer criticism?" "Do you feel he keeps worrying about anything?". Questions covered the

following segments Work related, Home adjustment, Social & peer-group adjustment and self-management. An expert panel was contacted to review the questions for content and context validity. Further, a pilot study was done on five participants and the final draft was used for the interviews which consisted of 25 questions.

#### **Data collection:**

Informed consent was taken from the participants through the 'Consent form' with assurance of confidentiality. Interviews were audio taped with permission of the participants. Average time taken for the interviews was 90 minutes.

#### **Data Analysis**

Deductive approach for Qualitative analysis was adopted to analyse the transcripts and memos. For the analysis of the transcripts, results of the complex query tool of ATLAS.TI 6.2 version were taken into consideration. The codes obtained in the qualitative analysis of the parent's responses about their perception of the nature of child stress have been categorized into superordinate themes: Psychological, Emotional, Physical and Behavioural Domains with reference to the International Stress Management Association (2014). Memos were analysed with Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework (Silverman, 2000). IPA provided the thick description of lived experiences of the participants in greater details. Memos provided the non-verbal cues which helped the researcher to relate the participants' feelings and emotions.

#### **Results and discussion:**

In the following paragraphs, parent's responses about nature of stress in children are reflected in themes categorized according to four domains.

Psychological Signs & Symptoms: The following themes were categorized under "Psychological responses"

Inability to concentrate and make simple decisions: Most of the parents mentioned that their children were not able to concentrate and related it to lowered scholastic performance. Some of the responses from the interview transcripts are quoted below which reflects the issue: "he is a

very distracted child cannot concentrate on his studies.” “...When we start studying he starts telling stories and never concentrates on his work.” “Even his teacher complains that he lacks concentration.”

Depression and anxiety: Parents did not mention specifically about depression. But, worrying and anxious nature of children was noticed when parents quoted “His mood nowadays is ok. But yes I do feel he becomes anxious sometimes.” Another parent quotes “I feel he worries about death and asked once about adoption. He asks me if I die who will take care of me. I try to explain him that nothing will happen to me. ”

Other themes under this category which reflected from the transcripts / memos were negative thinking and less intuitive and creative,

Emotional Signs & Symptoms:The following themes were under “Emotional responses”

Tearful: When child felt things going out of control, felt frustrated or was more sensitive to criticism, he/she became tearful. Parents mentioned “If somebody says something to her, especially her friends, she immediately starts crying.”

Compulsive Habits: Some of the peculiar habits of children were noticed which made parents irritable. “His habit of nail biting irritates me.” “He has a habit of chewing his upper lip between his teeth” Other habits were T.V. watching, playing beyblade, listening music keeping headphones on.

Feeling out of control: There were some situations where children could not understand how to handle effectively. One parent mentioned the following experience ... “Bus bullying was a traumatic experience for him. He was not ready to go to school. When I gave him assurance of support, he opened up. But during that time he underwent tremendous pressure.”

Other parents mentioned responses like frequent mood changes, sensitivity to criticism in trivial matters, defensiveness, lack of motivation, lowered confidence.

Physical Signs & Symptoms:Responses relating to frequent cold/ cough, allergies, rashes, skin irritations, constipation, acidity, aches were mentioned by parents. Some of their responses are presented in quotes. “Every night he says that he is tired all the time but I think probably he does

not want to go to school”.

Behavioural Signs & Symptoms: Under “Behavioural responses” the following themes about children’s behaviour as observed by parents were categorized: Difficulty in relaxing, forgetfulness, day-dreaming, recklessness, wasting time and reduced self-care. For example, a parent said “He always complains that there is no time to play”. Another parent said “He does not take good care of himself.” Some of the parents also mentioned that the child back-answers and reacts impulsively.

### **Conclusion:**

It can be concluded that parents were not aware of the entire range of signs and symptoms of the stress in the given domains: Emotional, Psychological, Behavioural, Physical. When talking about stress in children, parents related more to the academic pressures felt by children. Psychological and emotional signs were predominantly reflected. If a physical symptom persists, after ruling out a physiological reason, then there could be possibility of some underlying psychological issue which is manifested in the form of physical symptoms, which the parents could not relate to signs and symptoms. Most parents noticed that children were suffering from common cold/ allergies, skin irritations but did not relate them with stress. Feelings of shyness, hesitation in asking doubts in school were common patterns noticed by all the parents, but again they could not relate it to signs of stress. Patterns of negative self-talk, low confidence and anger were perceived by parents as part of the child’s temperament, not as a temporary signs of stress. Difficulty to concentrate and frequent distraction were identified as behavioural issues, not relating to the psychological basis of these behaviours. Parents were aware that experiences like bullying had been traumatic which was reflected in school refusal and physical symptoms. When children asked doubts about death issues, parents found it difficult to answer clearly.

### **Limitations and Future Implications:**

Perception of father could not be compared as only mothers were included as participants for the current study. The scope of the study is limited to 8-12 year old children in Indian context. Based on this study of qualitative exploration, modules for creating awareness about signs and symptoms of stress among children can be developed for parents and teachers. Such studies can

provide the background for large scale quantitative studies in the area of childhood stress. Future studies comparing the parental perception with the views of children about how they experience stress can give interesting results.

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