



## Impact of Parental Stress on Their Relationship with Teenage Children

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**ABSTRACT** The present study investigated the role of stress in determining quality of the parent-child relationship. Families for the present study were nuclear families from middle and upper-middle class where both parents were at least graduate and were working and had one teenaged son and teenaged daughter between 13-19 years of age. The present study was based on a sample of 400 respondents (100 of each fathers, mothers, sons and daughters). A self-constructed socio-demographic questionnaire, Socio-Economic Scale, Parent-Child Relationship Scales and Perceived Stress Scale were used in the present study. It was found that mothers were significantly more stressed than fathers. There were no significant differences in the parenting patterns of low stressed and moderately stressed fathers, whereas, low stressed mothers were found more accepting and realistic in their expectations by their sons and daughters. Sons perceived their moderately stressed fathers as significantly more careless, rejecting and physically punishing while moderately stressed mothers as indifferent. However, daughters did not differentiate between the parenting of low stressed and moderately stressed parents.

### INTRODUCTION

Feeling stressed is more than being alert or aroused and it is when you feel under pressure to do something and think you will fail. The more important the outcome, the more stressed you feel. Stress is a process, not a diagnosis. The level and extent of stress which a person may feel depends upon to great extent of their attitude to a particular situation. An event which may be extremely stressful for one person can be a mere hiccup in another person's life. When the term 'stress' is used in clinical sense, it refers to a situation that causes discomfort and distress for a person. Stress is problem when a person feels that he cannot cope with it. As a clinical problem, stress occurs when the demands made on a person exceed, or he feels those exceed, his ability to cope with. As far as parent-adolescent relationship is concerned stress and anxiety symptoms have received recent attention as important indicators of maternal and paternal well-being. Research supports that stress and anxiety symptoms are linked to poorer relationship (Addis and Bernards 2002; Dehle

and Weiss 2002). Children of parents with anxiety disorders exhibit more symptoms of anxiety and other related problems.

Major stressful experiences pose a potential risk to the adequate functioning of children and the families. Within a family, mother and father can have different attitude towards stress related events and successful management of these stressful events determines their relationship with their children as good or bad. Almost all stressed out parents state social anxiety and relationship difficulties as their primary causes of stress. Looking at the growing rate of divorces, court cases for alimony, physical abuses and single parents, the handling of relationship seems to be a tricky and often taxing issue. Research examining the processes through which negative events affect children, has suggested that stressful experiences affect parents' behaviour and functioning, which in turn, affect children and adolescents' well-being and the stressful experiences are associated with the parents' emotional distress (Conger et al. 1992, 1994). Parents' distress is, in turn, associated with harsh and punitive parenting, and it is associated with adolescents' emotional distress (Elder et al. 1985). Mothers experiencing stressful events are more likely to display less affection, acceptance, and supervision, and are more likely to use aversive methods of control or discipline. Low family income, family structure

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(i.e. number of parents and children in the home), parental education and past stressful life events are major indicators of chronic life stress. Stressful life conditions may influence as to how a parent views a child and as stress increases, the child may be perceived more negatively. Children's perceptions of parenting may be influenced as well.

It has been, therefore, assumed that stress experienced by parents and their ability to cope up with various stressful events may affect their overall relationship with their children. Keeping this in view present research study was planned with the following objectives:

1. To study the perception of parents regarding relationship with their teenage sons and daughters across various levels of stress.
2. To study the perception of teenage sons and daughters regarding relationship with their parents across various levels of parental stress.

## METHODOLOGY

**Locale:** Families for the present study were purposively selected from four zones (zone1, zone2, zone 3 and zone 4) of Ludhiana city as per outlines given by the Municipal Corporation of Ludhiana.

**Sample Selection:** The study was conducted on 100 nuclear middle and upper-middle class families where both parents were at least graduate and were working and had one teenaged son and teenaged daughter between 13-19 years of age. Families with the history of divorce/ remarriage/ chronic illness or mental ailment were not included. The target sample in each family was father, mother, son and daughter. Thus, the present study was based upon a total sample size of 400 respondents (100 of each fathers, mothers, sons and daughters).

A list of government and semi-government organizations such as banks, offices and educational institutions located in these four different zones of Ludhiana was prepared from head offices/concerned departments of the respective institutions. The heads of the respective organizations were approached and objectives, implications and utility of present work were discussed. This helped in getting the necessary co-operation of the authorities in sample selection. So as to get an ideal sample for the study, all the staff members were given

self-designed socio-demographic questionnaire and socio-economic status scale to identify socio-personal characteristics and economic status of the families. This was done to identify those employees whose families met the essential criteria for inclusion in the sample. Further from this list middle and upper-middle class nuclear families were selected as per selection criteria set for the present study. The residential addresses of these selected families were collected and zone-wise mapping was done. Necessary care was taken to choose the sample proportionally from all the zones and across all the institutions so as to avoid clustering of sample to one particular zone or institution.

**Research Instruments:** A self constructed socio-demographic questionnaire was used to identify families that fulfilled the inclusion criteria set for the present study. Apart from contact addresses, it consisted of information pertaining to socio-personal characteristics of the respondents e.g. age, educational qualifications, occupation, family type, number of children and physical and mental health status of the family members. Socio-Economic Scale (Bhardwaj 2001) was used to identify families with middle and upper-middle socio-economic status. Parent-Child Relationship scale by Sharma and Chauhan (2002) was used to assess the quality of parent-child relationship as perceived by parents. There were eight questions in the test related to eight different dimensions of parenting. Relationship of teenage sons and daughters with their parents was assessed by using Parent Child Relationship Scale by Rao (2001). It measures the characteristic behaviour of the parents as experienced by their children, that is, it measures the paternal and maternal relationship with children. The scale contains 100 items categorized into ten dimensions of parenting. The scale is scored separately for each of the parent. Perceived Stress Scale by Cohen et al. (1983) was employed for assessing the level of stress as perceived by parents. The scale consisted of 10 negatively stated items.

**Data Collection:** The investigator approached the selected families at their homes. Families were first contacted on phone and suitable time was decided to meet all the respondents of the family at same time, that is father, mother, son and daughter. Before administering various tools, respondents were explained the aim and relevance of the present study and were assured that the information given by them would be kept

strictly confidential. The respondents were provided with instruction regarding how to respond to each tool. They were requested to answer objectively and without discussing the responses among themselves, so that information reflects reality. Necessary care was taken not to suggest or give direction or indicate investigator's bias. The tools were answered by all the respondents of the selected families independently in the presence of the investigator.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 1 projects per cent distribution of mothers and fathers across various levels of perceived stress. It was observed that 49 per cent of fathers and 31 per cent of mothers were found low in stress whereas 48 per cent of fathers and 67 per cent of mothers were found moderately stressed. Only 3 per cent of fathers and 2 per cent of mothers were found highly stressed. Significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) differences were found in the frequency distribution of mothers and fathers. It was found that significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) more number of fathers reported low stress whereas significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) more number of mothers experienced moderate level of stress.

**Table 1: Per cent distribution of parents across various levels of stress**

S. Stress level No.	Parent category				Z-value
	Father		Mother		
	f	%	f	%	
1. Low stress	49	49.00	31	31.00	2.598*
2. Moderate stress	48	48.00	67	67.00	2.718*
3. High stress	3	3.00	2	2.00	0.453

\*Significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ )

Table 2 depicts perceived stress levels of parents. It is observed that though mean score of mothers and fathers were comparable across three levels but overall mean scores indicated that mothers reported significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) more stress than fathers. Full time maternal employment could be the most predicting reason for this. Nelson and Quick (1985) reported that employed women experience greater stress than men. They revealed that working women live in a social system which forces them to perform both familial as well as professional roles and due to this they experience more stresses and

strain. Tangney and Feshbach (1987) also concluded from their study that mothers who work full time outside the home tended to be more stressed than mothers who work part time or who did not work outside the home. The present findings are in agreement with that of Shukla (1988) who reported that working women due to lack of time to interact freely with husband and lack of time to provide adequate love and care for their children had more pressure and stress on their mind.

**Table 2: Comparison of mean scores of parents across various levels of stress**

S. Stress level No.	Parent category				t-value
	Father		Mother		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1. Low stress	9.49	2.78	9.45	2.67	0.061
2. Moderate stress	18.19	3.99	18.91	3.52	1.027
3. High stress	29.33	2.52	29.00	0.00	0.178
Over all	14.26	6.09	16.18	5.74	2.294*

\* Significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ )

Perception of low stressed and moderately stressed fathers regarding their teenage children across eight dimensions of parent-child relationship is projected in Table 3 There were no significant differences in the parenting patterns of low stressed and moderately stressed fathers. It is evident that attitude for both sons and daughters remained unaffected by perceived stress level of the fathers.

Table 4 depicts mothers' perception for their sons and daughters across two levels of perceived stress and across eight dimensions of parent-child relationship. It was found that mothers who reported low stress (8.58) showed significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) more accepting behaviour for their sons as compared to moderately stressed mothers (7.78). They were more loving, affectionate, caring and accepting to the ideas and judgments of their children. In other words they value autonomy, recognized child's individual rights and gave their children freedom to express themselves. The findings are in accordance with that of Elder et al. (1985). They found that mothers experiencing stressful events are more likely to display less affection, acceptance, and supervision, and are more likely to display aversive methods of control or discipline.

For realistic role dimension, these mothers again scored higher mean value both for sons

**Table 3: Difference in the mean scores of low stressed and moderately stressed fathers' perception of PCR with their sons and daughters**

S. No.	Dimensions of PCR	Fathers' stress level									
		Fathers' perception for sons					Fathers' perception for daughters				
		Low stress (n=49)		Moderate stress (n=48)		t-value	Low stress (n=49)		Moderate stress (n=48)		t-value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1.	Acceptance	8.39	1.63	7.71	1.90	1.890	8.53	1.57	7.88	1.73	1.953
2.	Over protection	7.31	1.66	7.02	1.54	0.878	7.55	1.70	7.31	1.61	0.709
3.	Over-indulgence	6.49	1.61	6.60	1.36	0.377	6.61	1.55	6.48	1.44	0.437
4.	Utopian-expectation	7.24	1.65	7.08	1.74	0.470	7.29	1.70	6.94	1.87	0.960
5.	Severe moralism	7.10	1.46	6.71	1.70	1.224	7.24	1.44	6.69	1.85	1.661
6.	Severe discipline	6.71	1.68	6.67	1.55	0.145	6.76	1.75	6.65	1.87	0.297
7.	Marital adjustment	7.73	1.64	7.29	1.91	0.225	7.73	1.71	7.31	1.95	1.137
8.	Realistic role expectation	8.67	0.92	8.17	1.95	1.642	8.71	0.94	8.29	1.57	1.614

**Table 4: Difference in the mean scores of low stressed and moderately stressed mothers' perception of PCR with their sons and daughters**

S. No.	Dimensions of PCR	Mothers' stress level									
		Mothers' perception for sons					Mothers' perception for daughters				
		Low stress (n=31)		Moderate stress (n=67)		t-value	Low stress (n=31)		Moderate stress (n=67)		t-value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1.	Acceptance	8.58	1.82	7.78	1.51	2.299*	8.55	1.88	7.91	1.46	1.830
2.	Over protection	7.35	1.64	7.30	1.72	0.153	7.58	1.69	7.43	1.76	0.392
3.	Over-indulgence	6.29	1.87	6.60	1.62	0.829	6.26	1.67	6.70	1.69	1.213
4.	Utopian-expectation	6.71	1.64	7.43	1.43	2.225*	6.90	1.76	7.63	1.47	2.132*
5.	Severe moralism	6.87	1.69	6.85	1.49	0.060	6.97	1.74	6.87	1.58	0.288
6.	Severe discipline	6.32	1.87	6.48	1.57	1.428	6.48	1.96	6.72	1.67	0.606
7.	Marital adjustment	7.97	1.52	7.46	1.52	1.530	7.90	1.54	7.45	1.58	1.339
8.	Realistic role expectation	8.84	1.24	8.16	1.48	2.199*	8.84	1.34	8.19	1.44	2.106*

\* Significant (p ≤ 0.05)

**Table 5: Difference in the mean scores of perception of sons and daughters regarding PCR with low stressed and moderately stressed fathers**

S. No.	Dimensions of PCR	Fathers' stress level									
		Sons' perception					Daughter's perception				
		Low stress (n=49)		Moderate stress (n=48)		t-value	Low stress (n=49)		Moderate stress (n=48)		t-value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1.	Protecting	37.84	5.85	38.06	4.49	0.213	40.14	5.10	38.40	6.05	1.539
2.	Symbolic Punishment	27.92	5.28	30.54	5.95	2.298*	27.53	7.57	28.52	6.67	0.683
3.	Rejecting	18.49	4.77	21.19	7.32	2.154*	18.27	5.92	19.98	7.32	1.269
4.	Object Punishment	20.63	6.48	22.46	8.23	1.215	17.69	6.33	18.69	7.02	0.732
5.	Demanding	30.57	7.25	32.96	6.81	1.670	30.27	9.04	30.06	7.88	0.118
6.	Indifferent	24.88	5.40	25.88	6.45	0.826	25.29	6.39	25.27	5.54	0.012
7.	Symbolic Reward	36.14	7.32	36.35	6.71	0.148	37.86	6.91	37.08	7.11	0.544
8.	Loving	36.63	7.85	37.65	6.35	0.698	38.14	6.57	36.10	6.68	1.515
9.	Object Reward	31.59	7.88	32.54	7.82	0.596	31.33	7.93	30.79	7.49	0.341
10.	Neglecting	20.00	5.66	23.42	7.27	2.585*	20.14	5.74	21.25	5.89	0.937

\*Significant (p ≤ 0.05)

**Table 6: Difference in the mean scores of perception of sons and daughters regarding PCR with low stressed and moderately stressed mothers**

S. No.	Dimensions of PCR	Mothers' stress level									
		Sons' perception					Daughter's perception				
		Low stress (n=31)		Moderate stress (n=67)		t-value	Low stress (n=31)		Moderate stress (n=67)		t-value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1.	Protecting	40.71	4.92	39.97	4.77	0.706	41.87	4.22	41.06	5.92	0.686
2.	Symbolic Punishment	30.87	6.55	30.33	5.40	0.432	28.81	6.88	31.03	5.30	1.753
3.	Rejecting	18.23	6.05	19.75	7.08	1.033	16.74	4.58	19.12	6.85	1.756
4.	Object Punishment	21.65	6.85	21.91	7.36	0.169	17.90	6.31	20.37	6.91	1.691
5.	Demanding	32.00	8.13	32.30	6.33	0.198	29.77	8.55	32.43	7.15	1.608
6.	Indifferent	24.48	4.80	27.31	6.05	2.289*	27.06	5.92	25.28	5.30	1.490
7.	Symbolic Reward	37.52	7.35	37.36	6.66	0.106	38.23	6.40	37.90	6.38	0.238
8.	Loving	38.97	6.88	38.22	6.68	0.508	40.42	5.66	38.58	6.60	1.338
9.	Object Reward	32.06	8.19	33.16	7.54	0.653	32.29	7.59	32.03	6.79	0.170
10.	Neglecting	18.84	5.10	21.01	6.81	1.585	18.52	5.09	19.99	5.66	1.233

\*Significant (p ≤ 0.05)

(8.84) and daughters (8.84) which indicates that less they were stressed better they were able to control their emotions and more consistency they had in their thoughts and actions. Whereas, mothers who perceived moderate stress were found to have significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) more unrealistic expectations from their teenage sons and daughters. These mothers demanded high quality performance and imaginary perfection from their children. It may be inferred that more was the stress, more unrealistic was the attitude of the mothers. The findings are similar to that of Addis and Bernard (2002) and Dehle and Weiss (2002) who reported that stress and anxiety symptoms are linked to poorer relationship functioning. Conger et al. (1992, 1994) while examining the processes through which negative events affected children has suggested that stressful experiences affect parents' behavior and functioning, which in turn, affect children and adolescents' well-being. Parents' distress is associated with harsh and punitive parenting, and harsh parenting is associated with adolescents' emotional distress.

It is also observed from findings of present study that stress has affected mothers but not fathers. Reason for this could be that mothers interact more than fathers and they have to perform task of juggling dual roles. Findings of Voydanoff (1988) and MacEwen and Barling (1994) are in agreement with the present study. They reported that family demands were more influential for women's perceptions of work-family conflicts and they experienced higher levels of anxiety and depressions than men. It is concluded that less interaction of fathers and low perceived stress level could be the reasons for similarity in perception of low stressed and moderately stressed fathers.

Table 5 displays perception of sons and daughters for their low stressed and moderately stressed fathers. It is clear from the table that out of ten dimensions significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) differences between low stressed and moderately stressed fathers were found only on three dimensions viz. symbolic punishment, rejecting and neglecting. Significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) differences in mean values on these dimensions indicated that fathers who showed moderate level of stress were perceived as more symbolic punishment giving, rejecting and neglecting. This also indicates that the dimensions on which fathers were rated high were all negative dimensions

which means that stress increased tendency for negative parenting. Fathers with more perceived stress were reported as more aversive, disdainful and rejecting. In addition to this, they used more physical means to punish their sons and were found to have careless attitude towards needs and demands of their sons. However, comparable mean values across all the dimensions indicated non-significant differences in perception of daughters regarding their relationship with low stressed and moderately stressed fathers. In other words perceived stress by fathers did not influence their daughters' perception on any dimension of parenting.

Mean values projected in Table 6 indicated that daughters' perception was not significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) affected by maternal stress. Boys perceived moderately stressed mothers as significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) indifferent in their attitude. Mean values of low stressed and moderately stressed mothers on rest of the dimensions were found comparable. Mothers who were less stressed, their mean value (24.48) was found significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) less than the mean value (27.31) of mothers who were moderately stressed. This showed that mothers who were more stressed were perceived to be passive in nature, unconcerned and apathetic to the needs of their sons. The results are in agreement with that of Elder et al. (1985) who found that mothers experiencing stressful events were more likely to display less affection, acceptance and supervision. Tangney and Feshbach (1987) reported similar findings by revealing that more stressed mothers were less empathic towards their children.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study revealed that there were no significant differences in the parenting patterns of low stressed and moderately stressed fathers, whereas, low stressed mothers were found more accepting and realistic in their expectations by their sons and daughters. Stressed fathers were perceived as careless, rejecting and more physically punishing whereas stressed mothers were found more apathetic towards their sons. It may be stated that stress played an important role as far as parent-son relationship was concerned. This reveals that daughters being more sensitive to parental stress, accommodate themselves to behaviour of

stressed parents and do not perceive them neglecting as stated by sons. Daughters' own submissive nature and boys' more demanding nature further adds to the negative behaviour of parents towards their sons.

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