

Improving Mental Well-being of Parents of Children with Developmental Disability

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Abstract

Background and Purpose: Families of individuals with developmental disabilities experience mental health challenges due to the vicarious stress of caring for their loved ones with disability. This parental/caregiver stress leads to the child with disability having less access to services and supports. The purpose of this translational research project was to evaluate the impact of a counseling program on parents/caregivers of children with developmental disability, in a community-based setting with diverse population.

Methods: This project utilized a quasi-experimental prospective pre- and post-survey design comparing psychological status at baseline and after the intervention. The intervention was a 12-week counseling program, virtual or in-person, held at a social service community-based agency. Standardized and validated survey tools were used to determine any change in the level of stress among the parents/caregivers of children 0-5 diagnosed with developmental disability, and their inter-relationships within the family unit.

Results: Of the 21 participants, 20 completed the study, majority of whom were people of color. Results showed statistically significant reduction in psychological distress, as well as improved inter-relationship within the family, and ability of the participants to utilize the strategies they learned as coping tools for future challenges. Furthermore, the study showed that virtual counseling is as effective as in-person counseling. There was no statistically significant improvement in the psycho-social functioning and couple's relationship.

Conclusion: Counseling, virtually or in-person, is a beneficial evidence-based intervention for parents/caregivers of children with developmental disability in promoting mental well-being and addressing health equity in a diverse population.

Implications: Counseling must be accessible and flexible to each family's needs. Public policy should be updated to address this and be culturally responsive to families. Further research should focus on a more rigorous study design and the possibility of combining other mental health interventions.

Keywords: counseling, mental well-being, developmental disability, parents, children, health equity