

Parental Stress, Coping, and Family Functioning in Families of Children with Special Needs: A Critical Review of Psychological Models

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Families raising children with special needs frequently manage sustained caregiving demands, uncertainty, role strain, service navigation burdens, and concerns about the child's future. Parental stress is consistently elevated across autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, special educational needs, and chronic pediatric conditions, but the magnitude and meaning of this stress vary significantly based on family resources, coping processes, and the broader ecological context. This article offers a critical narrative review of major psychological models used to explain parental stress, coping, and family functioning in these families. Rather than treating parental distress as a direct or inevitable consequence of diagnosis, the review argues that adaptation is better understood as a dynamic, transactional, and systemic process shaped by appraisal, child behavior, social support, family organization, meaning-making, and access to services. Five conceptual traditions are synthesized: transactional stress and coping; family stress models, especially the Double ABCX and Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response frameworks; family systems perspectives, including the McMaster model; family resilience frameworks; and ecological systems theory. The review's specific contribution is an integrative, multi-level framework that links demands, appraisal and meaning, coping and resources, family organization, ecological context, and adaptation outcomes. This framework extends existing family stress models by making appraisal, dyadic coping, family functioning, and service-system burden more explicit as interconnected mechanisms rather than treating adaptation mainly as a broad outcome of demands, resources, and meanings. Across these traditions, several robust conclusions emerge. First, behavior problems, caregiving intensity, and unmet support needs often predict parental stress more strongly than diagnosis alone. Second, coping is not merely an individual act but a family-embedded process that interacts with couple functioning, co-parenting, and social support. Third, family functioning is both a context for adaptation and an outcome affected by prolonged stress. The review concludes with implications for assessment, intervention matching, and future research on testable integrative models.

Keywords: parental stress, coping, family functioning, developmental disabilities, autism, psychological models

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North American Journal of Psychology, 2026, Vol. 28, No. 2, 1083-1100
© NAJP <https://doi.org/10.65696/001c.161762>

