

## MARITAL ADJUSTMENT OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The main goal of this study is to compare marital adjustment among parents of children with special needs and parents of children with normal development.

**Methodology:** The research sample is purposefully selected and divided into two groups (15 parents of children with special needs and 15 parents of children with normal development). Both groups of parents are from Gostivar, North Macedonia. MAT questionnaire, consisting of 15 items, is applied.

**Result:** It resulted with reliability coefficient Alpha Cronbach 0.71. The t-test results (30) =3.32;  $p < 0.05$ , show that there are statistically significant differences concerning the marital adjustment among parents of children with special needs and parents of children with normal development. Moreover, based on ANOVA with  $\text{sig} = 0.01$ , statistically significant differences were found regarding the educational level of parents with children with special needs and those of children with normal development.

**Keywords:** marital adjustment, parents of children with special needs, parents' education, parents of children with normal development

### INTRODUCTION

Parenting a child with special needs can be difficult, damaging and confusing endeavor; however, it is a role that can also be accompanied by happiness, triumph, and satisfaction. The stages of grief that parents undergo upon receiving news of a child with special needs mirrors the stages of mourning encountered when losing a cherished family member, Siegel (1996). According to Fortier and Wanlass (1984) the beginnings of family crisis may occur when parents suspect a problem their child may have, and they anxiously undertake a period of observing them. The family as a whole, just as the relationship between spouses, usually experiences stress as a result of the child's obstacles. The relationship of the couple gets complicated due to strong and contradictory emotions, which, each partner, as a parent of a child with special needs, should face. Almost every married couple argues time after time, even more than time after time (Powers, 2000). According to several researchers (Brobst, Clopton & Hendrick, 2009; Hauser-Cram et al., 2001; Higgins et al., 2005; Sicile-Kira, 2004) marital relationships experience and face stress as a consequence of problems created by the child with special needs. Parents experience high level stress in terms of physical, emotional, financial and marital aspect (Higgins et al., 2005). Marital stress is associated with child problems, economic difficulties, and changes in family functions (Hauser-Cram et al., 2001). The marital relationship can face stress and differences in opinions on created situations (Sicile-Kira, 2004). It is disheartening that some marriages break up. While various factors can contribute to the termination of a marriage, it is evident that having a child with autism introduces significant stress to any relationship. Sometimes, the burden of this additional stress can lead to the breakdown of a marriage (Powers, 2000).

## METHODOLOGY

### Study goals

The primary goal of this study is to examine potential disparities in marital adjustment between parents raising children with special needs and those with children with typical development, and prove whether there are differences in marital adjustment among parents with different levels of education.

### Research hypotheses

Based on the theoretical frame of the paper and the two main research variables, the following assumptions are presented for each purpose and research question:

H1. There are statistically significant differences in terms of marital adjustment between parents of children with special needs and parents of children with normal development.

H2. There are statistically significant differences in terms of the marital adjustment and the level of education between the both groups of parents.

### Research instrument

For the purpose of this research, the questionnaire for the demographic data and the original version of the instrument Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) Locke, H. J., & Wallace, K. M. (1959) is used. It consists of 15 items assessing and measuring harmony and adjustment between married couples. Based on the reliability coefficient of the test, through the analysis of Alpha Cronbach, presented in table 1, we can conclude that the test had a relatively good reliability with an obtained value of 0.71.

**Table 1. Alpha Cronbach of MAT test**

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.710	15

### Sample

The research is carried out in the city of Gostivar. The study sample is purposeful and is divided into two groups: the first group consisting of parents of children with special needs, while the second group consisting of 15 parents of children with normal development. It is taken care that the age of children of both groups is close. The total number of respondents is 30, 22 are women, while 8 are men.

## FINDINGS

**Table 2.** Descriptive table of marital adjustment

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PM	PN	15	106.16	11.841	1.349
	PNV	15	97.00	9.502	2.026

According to Table 2, we find that parents of children with special needs have the presence of the marital adjustment variable with a mean of 97, while parents of children with normal development 106,06. According to Levene's test in the table with sig 0,23 it shows that the groups are homogeneous and can be compared. The results of the t-test  $t(30) = 3.32$ ;  $p < 0,05$ , indicate that there is a difference between the groups and our hypothesis is accepted.

**Table 3.** Levene's coefficient about marital adjustment between two groups

Independent Samples Test											
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
Marital adjustment	Equal variances assumed	1.422	.236	3.329	30	.001	9.156	2.750	3.698	14.614	
	Equal variances not assumed			3.761	41.512	.001	9.156	2.434	4.242	14.070	

**Table 4.** ANOVA regarding the parents' education level of both groups of children

ANOVA					
ASQ					
	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1632.039	2	816.019	4.684	.010
Within Groups	34320.356	28	174.215		
Total	35952.395	29			

According to table 4, based on ANOVA analysis with sig=0.01, we find that there are statistically significant differences regarding the parents' education level of children with special needs and those with normal development. For more in-depth analysis on among which groups there are differences, see the results of the Scheffe's post hoc test. Based on post hoc analysis, we find that there are significant statistical differences at the level 0.05 between the percentage of parents of normal children and parents of children with special needs with 9 years (elementary) and higher education.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study support those of other studies on this issue which emphasize intensifying arguments and conflicts in marital relationships as a result of a child with autism and other created problems (Hauser-Cram et al., 2001; Higgins et al., 2005; Powers, 2000; Sicile-Kira, 2004), as well as reinforces them even more. Due to the ongoing involvement of mothers with the child and fathers occupied with longer work hours, the study revealed that parents have less time for each other, leading to challenges in spending quality couple time. This is confirmed by at least two other studies (Chawarska et al., 2008; Hutton & Caron, 2005). The stressful situation within the couple, characterized by persistent disagreements and conflicts, along with the struggle to find time for one another, can, in certain instances, prompt spouses to contemplate separation or even initiate divorce proceedings. According to Fortier and Wanlass (1984) the beginnings of family crisis may occur when parents suspect a problem their child may have, and they anxiously undertake a period of observing them. The relationship of the couple gets complicated due to strong and contradictory emotions, which, each partner, as a parent of a child with special needs, should face. In a study carried out at the

University of Tirana by Artur Rada “Children with autism and the social aspect (Impact on the family)” (2013), it was found that the child with limited abilities is often the object of arguments and conflicts in couples related to care, care schedules, treatment to be received, as well as costs. Arguments and conflicts in couples also occur due to economic and financial issues that arise in the family.

In the study, this is accentuated both by the parents who certainly found it more difficult to accept such a thing as a consequence of the culture and mentality, but also by the service providers who reinforce and clarify this issue even more. The study in relation to other studies is on the same line of findings (Powers, 2000; Siegel, 1996). Simultaneously, the research showed that a child with disabilities, while capable of adversely affecting the marital relationship, can also exert a positive influence, further strengthening and consolidating this relationship. This is also confirmed by Siegel (1996). According to this study, the positive impact is related to the common opinion of mothers and fathers that only united and relying on each other can they succeed in coping with the child’s problems and improving their health, which we also find in some other studies (Chawarska et al., 2008; Fein & Dunn, 2007; Powers, 2000). Research on marital adjustment among parents of children with developmental disabilities has revealed contradictory results. Numerous studies have shown that parents of children with developmental disabilities have lower marital adjustment than parents of children without disabilities (Lee, 2009; Kersh, Hedvat, Hauser-Cram & Warfield, 2006; Risdal & Singer, 2004); while other studies suggest that there is no difference between the two groups regarding marital quality (Holmbeck, Gorey-Ferguson, Hudson, Seefeldt, Shapera, Turner, & Uhler, 1997; Tsibidaki 2013). Additionally, a comparable research was conducted in Istanbul, aiming to compare the marital adjustment of parents of children with developmental disabilities to that of parents of children with typical development. The findings indicate that there were no significant differences in marital adjustment between the two family groups. Furthermore, in terms of gender groups, no significant differences were observed in the scores obtained from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). The findings of this study can serve as an important foundation for future researchers who intend to explore this topic further and conduct in-depth analyses of the connection between the two groups of parents.

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