

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MENTAL RESILIENCE AND STRESS: A FOCUS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Maria Pardali<sup>1</sup>, Despoina Paraskeva<sup>2</sup>, Nezam Tzaberis<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Scientific Collaborator, European University Cyprus (CYPRUS)

<sup>2</sup>University of the Aegean, Department of Pre-school Education and Educational Design (GREECE)

## Abstract

One of the most important challenges that people in the modern world deal with is the management of difficult situations and the adaptation to new conditions. These difficulties have resulted from the worsening of the problems on a social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental level. In this context, the concept of mental resilience is becoming progressively familiar as it describes the ways in which individuals, families, and communities manage to overcome their difficulties. The term is multidimensional and at an individual level, it is related to personality traits such as humor, optimism, and coping strategies assumed by an individual when facing stressful situations. On the other hand, resilience at the family level expresses a different kind of dynamics and complexity. More specifically, it focuses on the relationships and connections between family members and on how these relationships can be preserved and strengthened through the ongoing challenges a family might face.

At a time of multiple and complex problems for the society, when everything is changing rapidly, stress and mental resilience are becoming more and more critical to human existence. With this in mind, the birth of a child with special educational needs undoubtedly affects the balance and the dynamics of a family since it is often a challenge that increases the levels of stress within a family. Factors that help the parents to adapt to the new conditions are the so-called “protective factors” including the emotional, psychological and moral support, good relationship between the couple, and the development of a strong emotional bond between parents and children.

From this angle, the aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between mental resilience of parents of children with special educational needs and stress, as well as factors associated with their personal-demographic information. The study followed an empirical quantitative methodology. The research instrument used in this study was the standardized questionnaire Connor-Davidson Durability Scale (CD-RISC) which includes closed-ended questions in order to quantify the resilience of the sample. The survey was carried out during the first trimester of 2018 on a sample of 145 inhabitants of the Dodecanese Region. The results revealed that the sample had a high level of resilience, regardless of gender, age, educational level, income, marital status, and number of children. The participants possessed adaptation skills despite the obstacles and challenges. Finally, the participants recognized the importance of social support and the development of strong connections with people in their environment as anxiety relieving factors.

Keywords: resilience, stress, special educational needs, family.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The term resilience is used in many different fields of science such as engineering, ecology, economics, and is widely studied in developmental psychology, sociology, and social work. The etymology of the term comes from the Latin word *resilire*, which means reverting to the initial condition and relates to positive adaptation within the challenge. Resilience is defined as a dynamic psychosocial process through which individuals exposed to ongoing adversities or potentially traumatic events acquire experiences of positive adaptation over time [1] [2].

It is important to stress that resilience is not a fixed feature but is developed and cultivated throughout an individual's life and expressed differently according to the cultural context, gender and age. During childhood and adolescence, resilience is largely based on family processes, while in adulthood it is influenced by a variety of factors [2]. It is also multidimensional and is also linked to other terms such as competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping, and control [3].

Speaking of psychological resilience of parents to children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), it is necessary to link the term to family and society. Family and society interact with each other and are considered to be like communicating vessels where the problems of the wider total, such as society, are transferred to the smallest total of the family.

As stated by Potměšil & Pospíšil [4], Břichaček defines family resilience as the harmony of internal family processes, combined with the social and physical characteristics developed by its members and the experience they gain. According to him, "resilience means a situation in which individuals or families have physical fitness, intellectual ingenuity and good interpersonal relationships, enabling them to respond successfully to serious situations, in order to use the experience they have gained as a way of experiencing future situations".

Parents of children with special needs compared to the parents of typical developing children experience additional emotional, economic and physical fatigue and pressure [5] [6]. The birth of a child with disabilities most often finds parents unprepared and is treated as a devastating event. The process of adapting to new conditions depends on factors that interact with each other, such as anxiety and its intensity, type of disability, family vulnerability, way of functioning of the family, parents' personalities and the relationship between them, level of resistance to difficulties, and the strategies it adopts to solve the problems [7]. Anxiety within the family with a child with disability begins before the disadvantage is even diagnosed. Parents are very often suspicious of something wrong with their child. The structure and functioning of the family are largely influenced by the type of disability [6]. Conflicts and tension within the family are unavoidable, since emotional and psychological impacts are felt on all family members, as well as on the way the disabled child is treated in relation to his / her siblings [8].

A study conducted by Tsibidaki [9] in families with children with special needs found that the family rallied around the child with the problem considering it to be the weak link and needs special protection and attention. Many times, however, the parents' reactions are ambiguous, expressing the view that the source of all the problems faced by the family, such as the anxiety, fatigue and exhaustion experienced by all members of their families, are due to the disabled child [10].

It is worth noting that the father and the mother are reacting in a different way. There is often a polarization of views and one parent appears optimistic, at the same time the other is pessimistic or skeptical for some positive development. Mothers perceive better everything that is relevant to their child's health, they are less optimistic, they experience more stress as they try to restore balance within the family and take most of their child's care (as above: 91). Addressing of the anxiety experienced by parents plays an important role in the wider family and social environment. Good relations with the family environment such as grandparents, uncles, cousins as with the friendly environment, as well as the practical acceptance and understanding, are helping parents overcome psychological difficulties [11].

Olsson & Hwang [12] survey of 216 families of disabled children in southwest Sweden found that mothers are experiencing increased anxiety over fathers. Autism is a disorder that, along with mental disability, causes serious behavioral disorders in the child and significantly increases mothers' anxiety. The difficult behavior of the child restricts the mother's personal life, increases the pressure she feels thus she experience depression and discomfort. This, according to the researchers, is probably due to the fact that mothers are forced to give up their work and they take most of the child's care and the practical difficulties that arise in the home.

Another study, which demonstrated the increased anxiety felt by mothers compared to fathers, was conducted by Gerstein et al [13]. This study involved 115 parents with children with mental disabilities originating from central Pennsylvania and southern California. The results showed that the stress and pressure that mothers feel are significantly greater than fathers. Researchers argue that this is happening because mothers spend more time with the child but also because their identification with it, is strong. As mothers have indicated, important factors in reducing anxiety are the positive father-child relationship and the quality of the marital relationship.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The investigation of resilience and its interconnection with other factors such as gender, age, educational level, social and economic situation of parents of children with special or general learning difficulties presents an interest to research, so that the record of reality can provide solutions to the problem that afflicts many parents around the world.

The methodology followed is empirical quantitative with a research tool the standardized questionnaire [14] which includes the closed-type Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) queries to quantify the resistance of the sample [15]. The questionnaire was purchased at a small fee and was appropriately designed to cover the purposes of the initial research, which is based on four thematic axes: adaptability, belief in individual skills, acceptance of fate and management of anxiety. The present work focuses on issues related to stress management of the examined sample.

The reference population is made up of all potential parents of children with Special Educational Needs who are residents of the Dodecanese Region. This is due to the fact that 220 primary schools and 87 Secondary schools are distributed throughout 18 islands in the Southeastern Aegean. The distribution of the questionnaire was conducted in the first quarter of 2018 on a sample of 145 people.

Writing a research project offers many benefits to the scientific community, but it is almost always accompanied by restrictions on the generalization of its results. Although during the course of the research it was attempted to observe all the rules mentioned in the literature, it is necessary to mention as a restriction that the sample includes parents of children with SEN only from the Dodecanese region. Although the sample is considered to be satisfactory, the results of the survey would be different in the case of parents from other parts of Greece.

## 3 RESULTS

The majority of respondents are women, with 61.4% percentage, compared to 38.6% of men. As for the age, 8.3% is between 20-30, 35.2% is 31-40, 42.8% is in the age group 41-50, 11.0% is between 51-60 and a small percentage (2.8%) is over 60 years old. As far as their educational level is concerned, 9.7% have completed primary education, 11.0% junior high school, 41.4% high school, 27.6% have completed university studies and 10.3% postgraduate or a PhD. Regarding their professional status, 17.2% are civil employees, 44.1% private employees, 18.6% freelancers, 13.8% domestic, and 6.2% unemployed. They indicate as a monthly income from € 500 to € 1000 (51.1%), from € 1001 to € 1500 (30.9%), from € 1501 to € 2000 (9.4%) and over € 2000 (8.6%). The sample, with 22.8%, has one child, with 56.6% two and 20.7% more than two. Regarding the number of children diagnosed with special educational needs in the family, 96.6% declare one and 3.4% two. Of these children, 42.1% have specific and general learning difficulties, 16.5% speech and utterance problems, 9.0% mental retardation, 8.3% behavioral issues and autism respectively, 6.2 % Down syndrome and 9.6% other needs, such as motor skill problems, mental disorder, hearing-deafness, etc.

The statistic data in Table 4, which relate to stress management statements, show that the majority of individuals (47.60% with an average of them 3.14%) claim that they often have at least one close and secure relationship that helps them when they are anxious. They also claim, indicated by "Sometimes", statements as "during periods of anxiety/crisis, I know where to look to get help" with an average of 2.92, "I am in a position to deal with unpleasant or painful emotions such as sadness, fear or anger" with an average of 2.85, "I'm trying to see the funny side of things when I'm having problems" with an average of 2.32, "having to respond to anxiety can make me stronger" with an average of 2.57 and finally "under pressure, I remain concentrated and I think clearly" with an average of 2,69.

**Table 1:** Distribution of frequencies and percentages for stress management statements

STATEMENTS	Not at all		Rarely		Sometimes		Frequently		Almost always		Indicators	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Avrge	Std. Dev.
I have at least one close and secure relationship that helps me when I am anxious.	5	3,4	8	5,5	17	11,7	46	31,7	69	47,6	3,14	1,054
During periods of anxiety/crisis, I know where to look to get help.	7	0,1	12	8,3	26	17,9	40	27,6	60	41,4	2,92	1,167
I am in a position to deal with unpleasant or painful emotions such as sadness, fear or anger.	3	2,1	10	6,9	36	24,8	53	36,6	43	29,7	2,85	0,995
Under pressure, I remain concentrated and I think clearly	3	2,1	12	8,3	43	29,7	56	38,6	31	21,4	2,69	0,968
Having to respond to anxiety can make me stronger	4	2,80	14	9,70	53	36,60	44	30,30	30	20,7	2,57	1,013
I'm trying to see the funny side of things when I'm having problems.	12	8,30	20	13,80	49	33,80	37	25,50	27	18,6	2,32	1,172

In an effort to investigate the relationship between resilience and stress management, the results of the statements with a statistically significant difference are presented below. With regard to the relationship between male and female sample, the data in Table 2 show statistically significant differences in the statements "I am able to handle unpleasant or painful emotions such as sadness, fear or anger" with  $p = 0.048$ , "Under pressure, I remain focused and think clearly" with  $p = 0.029$  and "Having to respond to anxiety can make me stronger" with  $p = 0.027$ .

**Table 2:** Averages and standard deviations in relation to resilience and stress management among men and women

STATEMENTS	Men		Women		Statistically significant control	
	Avrge	Std. Dev.	Avrge	Std. Dev.	t	p
I am able to handle unpleasant or painful emotions such as sadness, fear or anger.	4,05	,942	3,72	1,011	1,990	.048
Under pressure, I remain focused and think clearly.	4,32	,765	3,99	,947	2,212	.029
Having to respond to anxiety can make me stronger.	3,57	1,263	3,10	1,216	2,234	.027

Regarding the relationship between resilience and age-related anxiety management, Table 3 reads statistically significant differences in choices, "I do not feel anxious and I am not easily disappointed by failure", with  $p = 0.032$ , "I consider myself a strong person when facing the challenges and difficulties of life" with  $p = 0.005$  and in "I am not anxious because I have a strong sense of purpose in life" with  $p = 0.013$ .

**Table 3:** Averages and standard deviations in relation to resilience and stress management depending on the age

STATEMENTS	Up to 40 years old		Over 40 years old		Statistically significant control	
	Avrge	Std. Dev.	Avrge	Std. Dev.	t	p
I do not feel anxious and I am not easily disappointed by failure.	2,46	1,023	2,84	1,006	-2,168	.032
I consider myself a strong person when facing the challenges and difficulties of life.	2,84	,971	3,27	,847	-2,824	.005
I am not anxious because I have a strong sense of purpose in life.	2,94	,903	3,29	,793	-2,520	.013

From the data in Table 4 on the relationship between resilience and stress management according to the level of education of the sample, there is a statistically significant difference in the statement "I am able to handle unpleasant or painful emotions such as regret, fear or anger" with  $p = 0.007$ .

**Table 4:** Averages and standard deviations in relation to resilience and anxiety management depending on the level of sample education

STATEMENTS	Non-graduates		Graduates		Statistically significant control	
	Avrge	Std. Dev.	Avrge	Std. Dev.	t	p
I am able to handle unpleasant or painful emotions such as sadness, fear or anger.	4,02	,874	3,56	1118	2,753	.007

According to the data in Table 5 there is statistical significance in the statements "Even when things seem without hope, I do not give up" with  $p = .003$ , "I am able to handle unpleasant or painful emotions" with  $p = .007$  and "In difficult situations, I feel I control my life" with  $p = .048$ .

**Table 5:** Averages and standard deviations in relation to resilience and parental anxiety management based on the gender of the child.

STATEMENTS	Boy		Girl		Statistically significant control	
	Avrge	Std. Dev.	Avrge	Std. Dev.	t	p
Even when things seem without hope, I do not give up	4,02	,864	4,44	,639	-3,066	.003
I am able to handle unpleasant or painful emotions such as sadness, fear or anger.	3,67	1039	4,13	,841	-2,731	.007
In difficult situations, I feel I am controlling my life.	3,76	,906	4,08	,926	-1,995	.048

From the processing of the data in Table 6, there are statistically significant differences in sample responses to the statements "Either good or bad, I think most things have reason to happen" with  $p = .009$  and that "I give the best self whatever it seems to be the result" with  $p = .048$ .

**Table 6:** Averages and standard deviations in relation of resilience and stress management, between married and divorced parents.

STATEMENTS	Married		Divorced		Statistically significant control	
	Avrge	Std. Dev.	Avrge	Std. Dev.	t	p
Either good or bad, I think most things have a reason to happen.	4,05	,891	3,48	3,48	2,637	.009
I give the best self whatever it seems to be the result.	4,48	,644	4,05	,921	2,087	.048

Regarding the relationship between resilience and anxiety management according to the number of children in the family, the data in Table 7 show a statistically significant difference in the statement that "I consider myself a strong individual in dealing with difficult situations and can respond to anything that happens "with an average of 4.08 and  $p = .042$ .

**Table 7:** Averages and standard deviations in terms of relation of resilience and stress management, depending on the number of children.

STATEMENTS	One child		More children		Statistically significant control	
	Avrge	Std. Dev.	Avrge	Std. Dev.	t	p
I consider myself a strong individual in dealing with difficult situations and can respond to anything that happens	3,76	,867	4,08	,773	-2,050	.042

#### 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The birth of a child with disabilities most often finds the parents unprepared and is treated as a devastating event. The feelings of joy and pride turn into sadness, frustration, anger and all the hopes and expectations that the child will be a continuation of the parents are abolished. The family's ability to accept disability, adapt and face the challenges it brings is called resilience. The process of adapting to new conditions and accepting disability depends on factors that interact with each other, such as anxiety and its intensity, the sort of disability, the family's vulnerability, the way of the family functions, the parent's personalities and the relationship between them, the level of resistance to difficulties and the strategies it adopts in order to solve the problems. Additional factors that affect the adaptation capability and the level of resilience are additional changes that occur within the family and anxiety factors beyond the child's disability. In this context, parents with positive perceptions have greater adaptability and they better manage stressful situations [8].

In this process, social services play an important role because they support families, on a psychological and social level. Just as important is the family's assessment that takes place [7]. This issue does not only concern parents, but also all educators and professionals with special education that work and cooperate to develop appropriate strategies and interventions [16].

In this context, the results of the research show that stress does not depend on the gender of the parents. This may be due to the modern lifestyle where individuals, regardless of gender, need to develop the skills required to adapt to new situations [17].

Regardless of gender, they experience increased levels of stress and are under pressure because of the problems they face [18]. They argue that this situation is improved through aid and social support, as is also documented by other surveys [18].

As far as the relationship between the sex of the children and the resilience of the parents is concerned, it appears that the families with a girl have more resilience than those with a boy. This is probably due to the patterns of socialization and the stereotypes created by boys' violence and aggression [19] versus the more closed and contracted behavior of girls [20]. It also emerges that although anxiety is not age-

dependent, parents over forty years old have a stronger sense of purpose in life, are not easily disappointed by failure, and they see themselves as strong people when faced with challenges and difficulties. This may be because middle-aged people opt for new ways of managing challenges in order to acquire the appropriate skills to help them cope socially and emotionally [21].

Although the survey data concludes that income criteria is not correlated with the mental resilience and management of the anxiety experienced by the sample, Kavaliotis' [22] (2015) research into the effect of family income on parents of children in the autistic spectrum, found that the higher the income the greater the resilience they exhibit and the less stress they feel. Similarly, Ouellette-Kuntz et al. [23], who studied 154 Canadian parents with children with mental retardation and developmental difficulties, concluded that parents who reported an annual income of less than 35,000 per year had lower resilience.

## REFERENCES

- [1] A. S. Masten & A. H. Gewirtz, "Resilience in development: The importance of early childhood," 2006. [Online]. Available: <https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/53904/Resilience?sequence=1>. [Accessed 14 07 2018].
- [2] R. Graber, F. Pichon & E. Carabine, *Psychological resilience. State of knowledge and future research agendas*, 2015.
- [3] K. Ginsburg & M. Jablow, "Building resilience in children and teens", Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014.
- [4] M. Potmėšil & J. Pospíšil, "Resilience factors in families of children with hearing impairment," *Psychologia Rozwojowa*, no. 1, pp. 9-25, 2013.
- [5] K. Chiasson & A. Reilly, "Families and their children with disabilities," in *Home-school relations: Working successfully with parents and families*, Barton, Allyn and Bacon, 2008, pp. 151-174.
- [6] A. Gena & G. Mpalamotis, "The family of child with Autism", vol. A, Athens: Gutenberg, 2013.
- [7] A. P. Greeff & K. J. Van der Walt, "Resilience in families with an autistic child," *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, vol. 3, no. 45, p. 347–355, 2010.
- [8] K. T. S'lungile, K. Ntinda & B. Hlanze, "Lived experiences of parents' of children with disabilities in Swaziland," *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 206-215, 2015.
- [9] A. Tsimpidaki, "The family with a preschool and school age child with special needs," 2005. [Online]. Available: <http://www.pre.aegean.gr/revmata/issue3/1%20%CE%A0%CE%A1%CE%9F%CE%A3%CE%9A%CE%97%CE%9D%CE%99%CE%9F%CE%A4%CE%A3%CE%99%CE%9C%CE%A0%CE%99%CE%94%CE%91%CE%9A%CE%97%20%CE%A1%CE%95%CE%A5%203.pdf>. [Accessed 15 09 2018].
- [10] A. Tsimpidaki, "Child with special needs, family and school: a relationship in interaction", Athens: Papazisis, 2013.
- [11] I. Strnadová, "Stress and resilience in families of children with specific learning disabilities," *Revista Complutense de Educación*, vol. 2, no. 17, pp. 35-50, 2006.
- [12] M. B. Olsson & C. P. Hwang, "Socioeconomic and psychological variables as risk and protective factors for parental well-being in families of children with intellectual disabilities," *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, vol. 12, no. 52, pp. 1102-1113, 2008.
- [13] E. D. Gerstein, K. Crnic, J. Blacher & B. L. Baker, "Resilience and the course of daily parenting stress in families of young children with intellectual disabilities," *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, vol. 12, no. 53, pp. 981-997, 2009.
- [14] A. Bryman & E. Bell, "Business Research Methods", New York: Oxford University Press., 4th edition, 2015.

- [15] K. M. Connor & J. R. Davidson, "Development of a new resilience scale: The Connor-Davidson resilience scale (CD-RISC)," *Depression and anxiety*, vol. 2, no. 18, pp. 76-82, 2003.
- [16] W. L. Heward, "*Children with special needs. An introduction in special education*", Athens: Topos, 2011.
- [17] M. Zhou & W. Lin, "Adaptability and Life Satisfaction: The Moderating Role of Social Support," *Frontiers in psychology*, vol. 7, p. 1134, 2016.
- [18] J. W. Peer & S. B. Hillman, "Stress and resilience for parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities: A review of key factors and recommendations for practitioners," *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, vol. 2, no. 11, pp. 92-98, 2014.
- [19] J. L. Spilt, H. M. Y. Koomen & P. Y. Mantzicopoulos, "Young children's perceptions of teacher-child relationships: An evaluation of two instruments and the role of child gender in kindergarten," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 31, 2010.
- [20] A. M. Sund, B. Larsson & L. Wichstrøm, "Prevalence and characteristics of depressive disorders in early adolescents in central Norway," *Child and adolescent psychiatry and mental health*, vol. 1, no. 5, p. 28, 2011.
- [21] V. Shetty, "Resiliency, hope, and life satisfaction in midlife," *IOSR journal of humanities and social science*, vol. 6, no. 20, pp. 29-32, 2015.
- [22] A. Kavaliotis, "Resilience of parents with a child in the autism spectrum and potential reinforcement factors for it: Family income and educational level," 2015. [Online]. Available: [https://www.romfea.gr/images/article\\_images/2017/05/oikogeniako\\_eisodima.pdf](https://www.romfea.gr/images/article_images/2017/05/oikogeniako_eisodima.pdf). [Accessed 09 08 2018].
- [23] H. Ouellette-Kuntz, A. Blinkhorn,, J. Rouette, M. Blinkhorn, Y. Lunskey & J. Weiss, "Family Resilience--An Important Indicator When Planning Services for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities," *Journal on Developmental Disabilities*, vol. 2, no. 20, 2014.