An overview of parent training and counselling with the parents of children with mental disabilities and autism in Turkey

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Abstract. Parents are significant contributors to the development of their children. They are the primary caretakers, managers, behavior models, disciplinarians, and agents of socialization and change for their children. It is accepted that parents can be trained as effective teachers of their children with disabilities. In Turkey, there are very limited opportunities, services, schools, parent education and support services for children with disabilities and their parents. Therefore, we have been carrying out studies to contribute to the understanding of the parents, specifically, on how a child with a disability affects their life and how they can be trained to become co-teachers and co-therapists. These studies are reviewed here.

The impact of children with developmental disabilities on the personal and the family life of parents has been examined extensively (e.g., Bryne & Cunningham, 1985; Donovan, 1988; Holroyd, 1974; Kazak, 1987). Families who have a child with a disability are at greater risk for stress and adjustment difficulties than families with a child developing normally (Blacher, 1984; Crnic, Freidrich & Greenberg, 1983). Problems in adaptation and family crisis, such as divorce, family problems and depression have been documented (Bristol, Schopler & McConnaughey, 1984; Vincent, 1990). A child with a disability is likely to be seen as a 'major disappointment' by the family, producing significant stress and adversely impacting the parents' well-being (Dunst, Leet & Trivette, 1988).

The degree of stress experienced varies from family to family, but is due, at least partially to a lack of preparation for the role of parent of a child with developmental disabilities and the adaptation that is required to cope effectively with the situation. Some evidence suggests that many families adapt successfully to the presence of and responsibility of caring for children with disabilities. Indeed, many families function well, in spite of the increased demands.

In the past, there have been limited resources available to the parents of children with disabilities in Turkey. Recently, however, considerable progress has been made in developing services to meet the needs of parents of children with disabilities. In particular, parent training and counselling services have been established, behavioral parent training programs have become part of
some school programs, and support groups have been formed. In addition, personal advocacy counselling has become part of the services provided to Turkish parents to assist them in developing better coping skills. Parents in all parts of the world have certain common features, including the parents of children with disabilities. Parents in Turkey demonstrate similar reactions and go through similar stages when told about their children’s conditions (e.g., disbelief, guilt, rejection, shame, denial). The support network is very important in the adaptation of parents. The broader systems or networks within which the family interacts have a powerful influence on the family system. Especially important are the interactions of family members with extended family (grandparents or others in the parents’ family). The extended family system in most parts of Turkey plays a large role in caring and nurturing children with developmental disabilities, and therefore, reduces the physical burden of the mothers in taking care of the child with the disabilities. To examine the interaction of the child, the family, the community and the culture seem to be vital for both understanding and intervention of those families. Therefore, the author has been carrying out studies to understand the characteristics and needs of parents of children who are developmentally disabled, and how the children with developmental disabilities affect their parents’ lives. The purpose of this paper is to review these studies and to point out some commonalities among the parents of children with disabilities.

Studies related to parent training and counselling

Parent training programs are widely accepted as one effective component among the services for families with a child who has a developmental disability. Parents of children with developmental disabilities may need special assistance to learn methods of behavior management. Parents can learn basic skills in applied behavior analysis to reduce maladaptive behaviors and increase some behaviors in their children. Through these programs, parents’ instructional skills improve and improvements in their children’s behavior reflect this improvement in terms of acquired skills (Baker & Brightman, 1984; Breiner & Beck, 1984; McConachie, 1986). The purpose of the first study (Akkok, 1984) was two-fold: to explore the effects of behavioral parent training on the development of self-help skills in children with moderate mental disabilities and to examine the effects of training on parents’ attitudes toward their children. Larger gains in self-help skills were expected from children of parents who received training compared to the children whose parents received no training (the Control group). It was also expected that parents assigned to the Experimental group would develop more positive attitudes toward their children than parents in the Control group. The study participants were 12 middle-class parent couples, ages (20–40), and their 12 children with developmental disabilities. None of the children possessed self-help skills prior to the study. Each set of parents was randomly assigned to