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Sleep quality and psychological wellbeing in mothers of children with developmental disabilities[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Sleep and behavioural difficulties are common in children with developmental disabilities. Mothers often wake and tend to their child when their child is having sleep difficulties. Therefore, mothers of children with developmental disabilities can have poor sleep quality due to these disruptions. The present study investigated the impact of sleep and behaviour problems in children with developmental disabilities on mothers' sleep quality and psychological wellbeing. The sample consisted of 46 mothers and 50 children with developmental disabilities. The results indicated that greater sleep and behaviour problems in children were significantly associated with disturbed sleep and increased depression, anxiety and stress levels in mothers. Mothers' sleep disturbance was also found to significantly predict poor maternal psychological wellbeing. The research limitations, implications of findings, and directions for future research are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Sleep has been described as a reversible state of reduced awareness and responsiveness to the environment (Stores, 2001). We spend one third of our lives asleep so sleep is an essential aspect of our daily lives (De Koninck, 1997). When sleep is disrupted, its importance becomes emphasised.

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Researchers indicate that disturbed sleep is associated with poor cognitive performance (Polimeni, Richdale, & Francis, 2007), depression (Breslau, Roth, Rosenthal, & Andreski, 1996; Meltzer & Mindell, 2007), anxiety (Bonnet, 1994; Gelman & King, 2001), high levels of stress (Meltzer & Mindell, 2007; Quine, 2001) and poor wellbeing (Gelman & King, 2001; Polimeni et al., 2007) in adults. Poor psychological wellbeing can be described as increased levels of stress, depression and anxiety (Davidson, Berah, & Moss, 2006; Uskul & Greenglass, 2005).

Children with developmental disabilities (DD) commonly have sleep problems which include: difficulties settling to sleep, night waking, early morning waking and co-sleeping (Clements, Wing, & Dunn, 1986; Quine, 2001; Robinson & Richdale, 2004; Stores, 1996). Although typically developing (TD) children also have sleep problems, these sleep problems tend to decrease as TD children age (Bartlett, Rooney, & Spedding, 1985). However, as children with DD get older, sleep problems often continue for many years (Quine, 2001; Robinson & Richdale, 2004). Since sleep problems can affect children with DD over a long duration, the impact of their sleep problems on their mothers and family should be investigated. Currently, research examining the impact of poor sleep in mothers of children with DD is scarce. Several studies have investigated the impact of sleep loss upon adults (Breslau et al., 1996; Field et al., 2007; Palesh et al., 2007) and more recently mothers of TD children (Boergers, Hart, Owens, Streisand, & Spirito, 2007; Meltzer & Mindell, 2007) identifying factors that may be associated with poor sleep in mothers of children with DD.

1.1. The impact of sleep and behaviour difficulties in children with DD on parents

Children with DD have a disability that impairs their natural development (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000; Richdale, 1999). These disabilities include disorders such as intellectual disability (ID), autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), Down's syndrome, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Such children can experience a myriad of difficulties including difficulties with sleep which can require substantial amounts of care and attention from their parents (Richdale, Francis, Gavidia-Payne, & Cotton, 2000).

Sleep difficulties in both TD children and children with DD have been associated with behaviour difficulties (Richdale et al., 2000; Shang, Gau, & Soong, 2006). Behaviour difficulties are considered as inappropriate or culturally abnormal, for instance, throwing tantrums, mood swings, and destructive behaviour (Quine, 1992). Sleep problems in children with DD have also been associated with parental stress (Quine & Pahl, 1985; Richdale et al., 2000). Stress is generally considered as a state of increased psychological tension which is often caused by a threatening or challenging situation (APA, 2000).

Richdale et al. (2000) examined the sleep and behaviour difficulties in 52 children with DD and 25 TD children and associated parental stress. Richdale et al. found that parents of children with a DD and sleep problems reported significantly more behaviour difficulties in their children and higher frequency and intensity of hassles compared to the control group. An explanation for this is that sleep loss in children may make them more prone to having tantrums, mood swings, and other daytime behaviour problems, which may negatively influence parental stress (Quine, 1991; Richdale et al., 2000).

Similarly, Shang et al. (2006) conducted a study on 1392 school children in Taiwan. This study showed that children's sleep problems were significantly associated with a range of emotional and behaviour problems in children. They also found that insomnia, late sleeping, sleep talking and nightmares in children were associated with increased parental mental distress. Quine and Pahl (1985) made a similar finding, they found that multiple impairments in children with a DD were associated with increased stress in mothers.

To summarise, the results from these studies and other similar studies indicate that sleep problems are related to behaviour problems in children and to parental stress (Polimeni et al., 2007; Quine, 1991, 1992; Shang et al., 2006). This, in turn, suggests that sleep and behaviour difficulties in children with DD can have a negative impact on their parents' wellbeing. Thus it is important to consider the impact of children's sleep problems on parents' sleep as disturbed sleep in parents can also affect their wellbeing.

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