

Disabled children - The psychological status of parents and the social network of siblings

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In the present dissertation I survey the results of research carried out in Estonia and Sweden regarding the personality characteristics, self-esteem, emotional states and depression symptoms in parents of disabled children. Social relations and self-esteem of siblings of disabled children are also investigated. The general aim of the current study was to investigate the situation of the parents and siblings of intellectually disabled children. The first aim was to measure personality characteristics and self-esteem in parents of disabled children and parents of non-disabled children in Sweden and in Estonia. The second aim was to compare personality characteristics of parents of disabled children with Estonian norms for the general population. The third aim was to find out if there were any differences between parents of disabled children and non-disabled children with reference to depression symptoms and emotional states. The fourth aim of this study was to find out whether siblings of disabled children differ with respect to social relations, at school and at home, personality and self-esteem compared to a control group.

The methods used in the first study were the Adjective Check List (ACL) by Gough and Heilbrun (1983), Eysenck Personality Inventory; EPI (1987) and Self-Esteem Inventories, Adult form (SEI) by Coopersmith (1990). In the second study I used a five-factor personality inventory (NEO-PI). The third investigation was carried out in Estonia and focused on depressive symptoms and emotional states. Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1961) and emotional states scale by Leskinen (1994) were used. In the fourth investigation sixty siblings of disabled children and a control group of sixty siblings of normally developed children aged 12 to 14 were studied. A questionnaire developed by Andersson (1997) was used.

Comparisons of the two parent groups did not give any statistically significant differences with respect to EPI and SEI in the Swedish-Estonian study (Lawenius, & Veisson, 1996). However, the results of the Estonian study showed that parents of disabled children were significantly more introvert than parents of non-disabled children. Comparisons of personality characteristics between the two groups gave the following results: 1) mothers and fathers of disabled children have a significantly lower Extraversion and Openness level compared to the Estonian norms for women and men; 2) in Neuroticism mothers of disabled children score higher than the Estonian women's norm, but fathers score higher only in some Neuroticism facets; 3) concerning Agreeableness, neither mothers nor fathers differ from Estonian norms; 4) in Conscientiousness fathers of disabled children score higher than the norms for men, but the data of mothers do not differ. The results of the third study showed that parents, especially mothers of disabled children, had significantly more negative emotional states and also significantly more depressive symptoms than parents in the control group. Significant differences in depression symptoms between the disabled and control parent groups were found in most cases. In the sibling investigation (fourth study) the results showed that there were a number of significant differences between the two groups.

Key words: Parents, children, mental retardation, siblings of disabled children, personality traits, depression symptoms, emotional states, siblings social relations.