



Ergin, B. (2024). We can overcome it together! A review on the concept of family stress. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET)*, 11(4), 841-853.

Received : 26.06.2024  
Revised version received : 11.09.2024  
Accepted : 15.09.2024

## **WE CAN OVERCOME IT TOGETHER! A REVIEW ON THE CONCEPT OF FAMILY STRESS**

*Research article*

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# WE CAN OVERCOME IT TOGETHER! A REVIEW ON THE CONCEPT OF FAMILY STRESS

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## Abstract

The aim of the study is to examine the postgraduate thesis on the concept of ‘family stress’ in the ‘YÖK National Thesis Centre’ database. In the study, in which purposeful sampling was made in line with certain criteria, 51 data sources were reached. Descriptive content analysis of the theses was carried out in the study, which was qualitative in design and data sources were examined by document analysis method. Analysis forms developed by the researcher were used for the analyses. As a result of the study, it was determined that the first study on the concept was in 2002, and the most studies were conducted in 2022-2023. It was determined that the number of master's theses on the concept was higher than the number of doctoral theses. It is observed that the fields that produce the most theses on the concept are psychology and education. It was concluded that the most recurring keywords in the index information of the theses were family, parent, stress and support. The results obtained in the study contribute as an original study in terms of approaching family stress from an interdisciplinary perspective and contributing to the production of effective solutions by considering social benefit.

*Keywords:* content analysis, family stress, parental stress, parenting stress

## 1. Introduction

Conceptually, family is defined as ‘the smallest unit in society based on marriage and blood ties and formed by the relationships between husband, wife, children and siblings’ (Türk Dil Kurumu [TDK], 2024). Based on this definition, the family is a micro-level social institution that gives individuals a sense of duty and responsibility and plays an active role in raising individuals in accordance with the social order (Güler et al., 2022). Today, the psychological impact of direct or indirect factors affecting the dynamics and structure of the family institution on individuals has led to the introduction of new concepts related to the family in the literature. Family stress, one of these concepts, is a concept that significantly determines the resilience of the family. Patterson's (2002a) Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) model explains family resilience based on the theory of coping with family stress and problems. The basic concepts of this model are demands, capabilities and meaning. In the model, meaning is used to explain how families make sense of protective and risk factors. This model states the risk factors and protective factors of the family as the balance of the family. When there is an increase in situations that may lead to an increase in risk factors in the family, stress characterised as ‘crisis’ occurs. When families face such situations, ‘regenerative power’ emerges if they endeavour to enrich their resources for strengthening the family unit. This power gained by families is defined as ‘resilience’ (Patterson, 2002b). The important criterion for family resilience, in other words, resilience, is the stability of family members in their ability to cope with stress and adapt to change by realising their own self (Özel & Üstün, 2023). Based on this point, family stress has become a topic that attracts attention in researches worldwide due to reasons such as earthquakes, pandemics, technological advances or changes in generations.



The element of balance in the family as a balanced interpersonal system (Erikson, 1980) varies depending on the mental, psychological, physical or critical events experienced by family members or the whole family (Iacolino et al., 2016). While children, adolescents, women and the elderly are seen as the individuals most affected by stress situations that cause disruption of the balance within the family, the fact that family members are in different risk groups is an important factor that makes family stress inevitable (Özel & Üstün, 2023). At this point, having a positive perspective of the family facilitates the family's coping process with stress against the difficulties experienced in the family (Walsh, 2003; 2012).

In the literature, family stress has been handled in different ways in terms of family dynamics. The parenting process, which is one of the important responsibilities of adulthood for individuals, and the difficulties experienced by parents in this process are seen as a special area of stress (Aydoğan, 2014). The stress experienced in the parenting process is acceptable because it has a demanding and responsible dynamic for spouses and children (Deater-Deckard & Panneton, 2017). In addition, economic distress, work stress, and challenging living conditions experienced by the family are different points that cause parenting stress depending on the parenting role (Holly et al., 2019; Uzunkoca, 2023). The fact that any of the family members has a disadvantageous situation is also stated as a factor affecting family stress. For example, it is stated that the birth of a child with a disability causes different stress situations in the relationships of family members with each other (Rayan & Ahmad, 2018). Because the presence of such a disadvantageous situation in the family increases the emotional burden in the family (Çalışkan & Bayat, 2016). This situation negatively affects the physical and mental health of parents, especially mothers, as they take more responsibility (Sadati et al., 2015). Based on the research results, global disasters and diseases can be shown as another variable that increases family stress. As a matter of fact, it was observed that the social isolation environment that societies were exposed to during the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide increased parenting stress (Balenzano et al., 2020). In addition, studies have concluded that negative parenting practices and parent-child conflict are more common due to the increase in COVID-19 stress level (Daks et al., 2020). Another important variable in terms of family stress is that mothers and fathers are not sufficiently attached to the parental role when they are unable to meet the physical or emotional needs of the child (Abidin, 1992). Hong and Yi (2017) found that family cohesion and flexibility in the family reduced parenting stress. Based on these findings, in summary, it is seen that there are many variables that affect family stress. When the variables are taken into consideration, family stress is seen depending on parenting practices, the presence of a disadvantaged situation in the family, the socioeconomic status of the family or social events. In addition, it is important in this process to prefer methods that strengthen family unity in coping with family stress.

When the study was evaluated in the context of the theses examined on family stress; family stress in families with children with physical disabilities and sociodemographic characteristics, depression and anxiety status of families (Yılmaz, 2022), the predictive effect of family stress in families with children diagnosed with autism spectrum (Bekdaş, 2022; Timuçin, 2018). As a result, it has been observed that family stress (autism spectrum disorder, mental disability, special learning disability, etc.) in families with children with special needs is mostly addressed in postgraduate theses on family stress (Akaoglu, 2021; Aydın, 2019; İlhan, 2014; Sivrikaya, 2012; Tekin Sert, 2017). In line with these findings, this study aims to determine the orientations in the field of family stress by examining the postgraduate theses carried out within the scope of this subject in Turkey based on the current literature on family stress. By contextually explaining the relationship between family stress and different variables, it is thought that the study will shed light on different orientations related to the subject for researchers.

## 1.1. Present study

Many concepts related to family have entered the literature. When the studies in the international literature on family stress, which is one of these concepts, were examined, it was seen that it is a concept related to many issues in terms of context. In the postgraduate theses examined in this study, it was concluded that the relationship between family stress and having a child with special needs was frequently investigated. However, it has been determined that issues such as effective parenting practices, family stress that may be caused by intergenerational differences in the process of raising individuals in accordance with the requirements of the century we live in, family climate arising from the expectations of children or parents and family stress that may be caused by this situation, family stress in the context of the balance between men and women caused by today's working conditions changing the sociological structure of societies have not been addressed from different perspectives. It is thought that the findings on family stress in the literature can be elaborated based on these needs. This study is valuable in terms of producing results that identify family stress as a virgin area in the existing literature.

## 2. Method

Document analysis technique was used in the qualitative research in order to examine the masses of information created on a specific subject and to evaluate them within the conceptual framework. In this context, postgraduate thesis on 'family stress' were analysed.

### 2.1. Data sources

In the research, it is planned to examine the studies on the concept of 'family stress' carried out in Turkey and registered in the YÖK National Thesis Database. Within the scope of the research, it is aimed to make content analyses as well as descriptive analyses of the studies dealing with family stress. In the research, 'YÖK National Thesis Centre' was used as a database. While searching the database, keywords such as the word to be searched [family stress, maternal stress, paternal stress, parental stress, parenting stress], the field to be searched [thesis name], and the search type [include in] were written in the advanced search tab. Thesis type, year, university, institute, field (discipline), no language restriction and being open to public access were determined as search criteria. In line with these conditions, 51 studies were reached within the scope of the study.

### 2.2. Implementation

The study data were collected with the 'Thesis Review Form' designed by the researcher, which includes the descriptive qualifications of the graduate studies within the scope of the research. The data of the study were collected in the 'YÖK National Thesis Centre' database in March-2024. Accordingly, it was determined that there were 9 studies with the key concept [family stress], 1 study with the key concept [mother stress], 1 study with the key concept [father stress], 17 studies with the key concept [parental stress], and 23 studies with the key concept [parenting stress]. It is thought that the 51 studies obtained in total fulfil all the criteria. Disregarding the fulfilment of the criteria of some variables (year, thesis type, subject area and keywords included in the index information) that are thought to have no effect on the results is a limitation for the creation of the data set.

### 2.3. Analysis of data

The data related to the studies examined within the scope of the study were first recorded one by one on the thesis review form. Then, each data in the thesis review forms was transferred to Microsoft Excel [Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, Washington, USA] file created by the



researcher. Visuals related to descriptive data were obtained through the programme. Then, the keywords in the index of each thesis were listed one by one by the researcher and counted. In the preparation of the visual, word cloud creation tool, which is an online programme, was used (WordClouds.com). Then, the content evaluation form developed by the researcher was prepared in line with the opinions of the field experts. Two field experts coded the studies by using the evaluation form. In terms of the reliability of the research, the data obtained are stored electronically. Creating a purposeful sample within the framework of certain criteria in the study is evidence to ensure external validity.

### 3. Results

Under this heading, 51 postgraduate thesis analysed within the scope of the research are evaluated descriptively and in terms of content and the relevant data are presented respectively.

#### 3.1. Descriptive findings related to the study

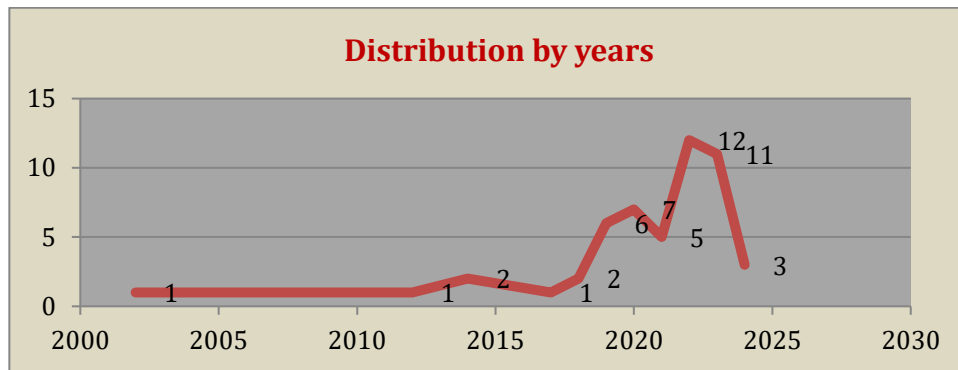


Figure 1. *Distribution of studies according to years*

It was determined that 51 studies on the concept of ‘family stress’ were conducted between 2002 and 2024. While it was observed that theses were produced in 2002, 2012 and 2014 (n=1), it was determined that the concept was frequently addressed by field experts in postgraduate thesis in 2017 and later. Especially in the years 2022 (n=12) and 2023 (n=11), it is noticeable that this concept is more focussed on (Figure 1).

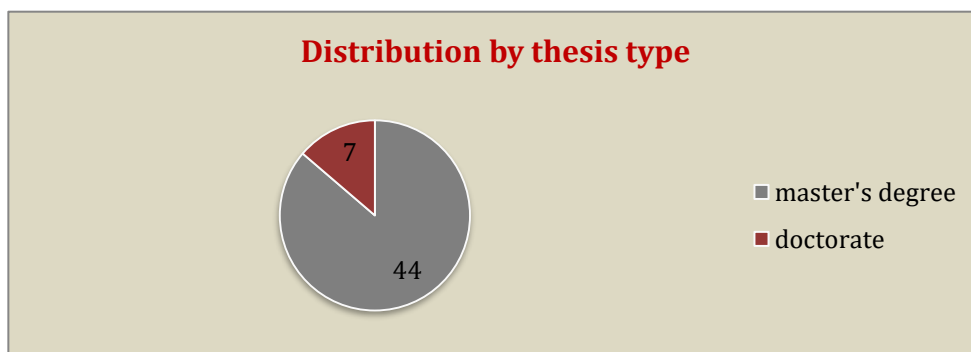


Figure 2. *Distribution of studies according to thesis type*

It was determined that 7 of the 51-postgraduate thesis in which the concept of ‘family stress’ was addressed were doctoral theses and 44 were master's theses (Figure 2).

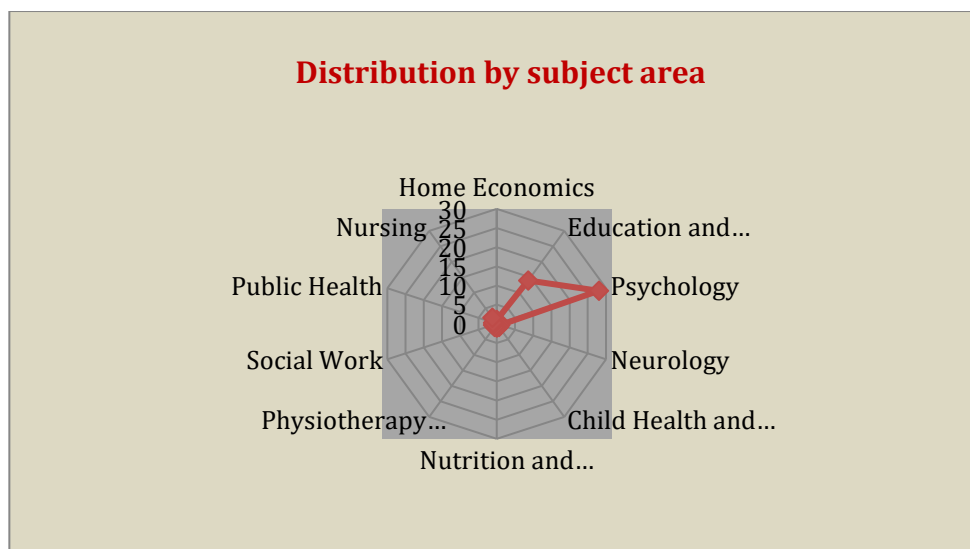


Figure 3. Distribution of studies according to subject areas

When the distribution of 51 theses on the concept of ‘family stress’ produced between 2002 and 2024 was analysed according to subject areas, it was determined that there were ten different subject areas. The fields with the highest number of theses are psychology (n=28), education and training (n=14) and nursing (n=2). These studies are followed by home economics, neurology, paediatrics, nutrition and dietetics, physical therapy and rehabilitation, social work and public health (n=1) (Figure 3).

### 3.2. Findings related to the content analysis of the study



Figure 4. Word cloud consisting of keywords

When the keywords of 51 postgraduate thesis studies on ‘family stress’ were analysed, one hundred and twenty different words were found. It is observed that the most recurring words

are family (n=52), parents (n=35), stress (n=31) and support (n=14) respectively. Family support, special education, children with special needs, attachment styles, coping/ coping with stress, autistic children, autism spectrum disorder, depression, mother-child communication, father-child communication, resilience, childhood, child abuse and marital satisfaction are other words that come to the fore. The least repeated words were nutrition, eating habits, family health, psychodrama, sociodrama, cognitive strategies, cognitive emotion regulation, desire to have children, psychological well-being, psychological resilience, cerebral palsy, psychiatric patients, sleep quality, chronic disorders, COVID 19, pandemic, self-efficacy, burnout and gifted children (Figure 4).

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

In this study, in which the theses produced on the concept of ‘family stress’ in Turkey are examined and evaluated about the conceptual framework, it is thought to contribute to future studies by summarising the cumulative mass of information. In this context, the aim of the study is to evaluate the postgraduate theses on the concept of ‘family stress’ produced in Turkey and registered in the YÖK National Thesis Database between 2002 and 2024 in terms of descriptive and content without any restrictions.

According to the findings of the study, when the distribution of the theses produced according to years is examined, it is observed that the number of theses produced on the subject has increased in 2017 and after. When an evaluation is made in this direction, it is thought that the social, economic, health and social-based changes in our country affect individuals and thus the family, the smallest association of society. It is seen that the theses produced in 2017 and before, in which the fewest studies were seen, focused on the effect of the concept of family stress on the feeding behaviours of preschool children (Akpınar, 2002), family burden and perceived social support of mothers with children with mental disability (Sivrikaya, 2012), family support in parents with disabled children (İlhan, 2014), and the effect of stress coping skills of parents with children with spina bifida on attachment styles (Tekin Sert, 2017). When these studies are examined, it is seen that the stress that develops in family members due to difficult conditions is examined whether it can be overcome with social support. After 2017, disasters, pandemics and economic crises on a global scale are considered as the main reason for the increase seen after 2017. In this sense, it will be possible to discover the specific reasons for the increase when the focal points of the studies in 2022 and 2023, when the most theses related to the concept were produced. One of these studies examines the coping attitudes of families with physically disabled children towards stress and anxiety (Yılmaz, 2022). Another study examines the relationship between psychological resilience levels and emotion regulation difficulties of parents with children with autism (Bekdaş, 2022). The striking situation in the study groups of other studies conducted in these years is that the parents of children with any disability or disability are included in the study group (Altan, 2023; Beyhatun, 2022; Işık, 2022; Karpuzluk, 2022; Kaya, 2023; Sasa, 2022). Another common feature in these studies is the examination of the effect of stress due to the fear of corona virus that develops in individuals during the pandemic period (Barata, 2022; Nehir, 2023, Sancılı, 2022). In line with all this information, it is possible to explain the increase in 2022 and 2023 with the increase in parents whose children are in the risk group in terms of health and the pandemic. In parallel with the postgraduate theses produced on family stress in Turkey, it is seen that similar subject contexts are discussed in the international literature (Maiya et al., 2024; Masarik et al., 2022; Neugebauer & Mastergeorge, 2021; Xu & Zheng, 2023).

According to the findings of the study, when the distribution of the theses produced according to their types is analysed, it is observed that master's theses are more than doctoral

theses. When an evaluation is made in this direction, it can be thought that such a conclusion is reached due to the predominance of master's degree education in postgraduate programmes in our country. Another reason can be considered as the longer duration of doctoral education. In this sense, it is thought that doctoral studies designed based on the needs of the period simultaneously with master's studies will contribute to the semantic development of the concept in the literature in the following years. The studies of Boyacı (2019), and Kurtoğlu and Süslü (2023) in the literature have similar findings with our study.

According to the research findings, when the distribution of the theses produced according to the subject areas is analysed, it is observed that they are concentrated in the fields of psychology and education and training. When an evaluation is made in this direction, it is thought that both the concept of stress being a psychological element and the fact that education and training activities are based on the individual, that is, psychology. Because the difficulties faced by individuals in daily life can cause anxiety. The complex interaction between our inner world and the external world can cause stress as a reaction. Therefore, it is known that education and psychology are the two main fields where these reactions in the behaviour of the individual are evaluated. When some of the theses produced in the field of psychology on the concept of family stress are examined, it is seen that the mediating role of the sense of integrity in the relationship between parental stress and sleep quality (Kurukütük, 2024), the regulatory role of shared parenting in parental stress and parental mentalisation (Ediş, 2023), the psychological resilience of mothers with chronic illness, the relationship between self-efficacy and parental stress (Beyhatun, 2022), parental burnout (Dinç, 2021), the relationship between parental stress and psychological resilience of parents with special needs children (Bakır, 2020; Sasa, 2022) were examined. When some of the theses produced in the field of education and training were examined, it was determined that the effect of the programme developed for parents of gifted children on psychological resilience and parental stress (Çiftçi, 2020), the effect of the training programme that develops positive discipline practices on parental stress and parental self-efficacy (Apaydın, 2022) and the relationship between the quality of parent-child communication and parental stress (Güven, 2024) were examined.

According to the research findings, it is observed that the most frequently repeated words in the keywords of the theses are family, parent, stress and support. The least repeated words are nutrition, eating habits, family health, psychodrama, sociodrama, cognitive strategies, cognitive emotion regulation, desire to have children, psychological well-being, psychological flexibility, cerebral palsy, psychiatric patients, sleep quality, chronic disorders, COVID 19, pandemic, self-efficacy, burnout and gifted children. There are different factors that can be considered as a source of stress in the family. These include financial impossibility, loss of relatives, illnesses, overprotective parental attitudes, conflict between spouses, divorce, marriage and problems with children. In fact, family stress is caused by the problems that arise in individuals' fulfilment of their responsibilities within the family. When the qualifications of the studies in 2022 and 2023, in which the most theses were produced, were analysed, the study groups were parents with children with autism (Bekdaş, 2022; Işık, 2022), families with physically disabled children (Yılmaz, 2022), families with mentally disabled children (Sasa, 2022), maternal stress (Abaş, 2023), parents who recently gave birth (Sonkaya, 2023), parents in the COVID 19 pandemic process (Sancılı, 2022), mothers with chronic diseases (Beyhatun, 2022) and fathers with children aged 4-10 years (Alaylı, 2023). The concepts that are generally focused on with family stress in studies are caregiving burden, coping self-efficacy (Pars, 2024), self-compassion, perfectionism, parental internal thinking functionality (Özbilgin İşildak, 2023), emotion regulation skills (Akel Güçlü, 2023), coronavirus anxiety, burnout (Nehir, 2023), perception of paternal role, psychological well-being (Alaylı, 2023), parenting stress, marital satisfaction, marital conflict (Koç, 2023), self-perception (Güven, 2024), sleep



quality (Kurukütük, 2024) and shared parenting (Ediş, 2023). When an evaluation is made based on the study groups and other focal concepts of the theses in 2022 and 2023, it is noticeable that the studies were carried out with risk and disadvantage groups. Therefore, the other focussed concepts are other variables that are predictors of crisis situations.

Since 2002, when the first postgraduate thesis were conducted in line with the context of the research, different variables affecting family stress have come to the fore as a result of changing living conditions. Especially in the 21st century, various stress factors have started to occur in life, considering the differences in parent-child, female-male roles, and the competences that individuals should have in business life. As a reflection of this situation, the social value of the family structure in terms of building a bridge between the past and the future is quite high. In the process of accessing different generations and adapting to the new century, family members' building their own existence as individuals in society is related to the family's ability to produce constructive and accessible solutions in the face of difficulties. From this point of view, it is necessary to look at family stress as a natural process to be experienced in different situations and to develop effective coping methods that protect the whole family. The results obtained in the study contribute as an original study in terms of approaching family stress from an interdisciplinary perspective and contributing to the production of effective solutions by considering social benefit.

## **5. Limitations and recommendations**

The study is limited to the theses produced about the concept of 'family stress' in the YÖK National Thesis Database. In this context, not including other databases or study types (articles, papers, etc.) in the study is considered as a limitation. However, 'YÖK National Thesis Database' is seen as a reliable data source for the studies in which document analysis technique is used. It may be suggested to use different databases and study types in other studies to be conducted on this subject. In addition, more verifiable study data can be obtained with additional criteria to be determined by the researchers. In this study, descriptive analysis and content analysis were used. In other studies of this type, visuals can be enriched by using different software and programmes. In addition, the gaps in the field for the same concept can be analysed with different techniques. While the data set of the study focusing on a concept is considered as a limitation, large data sets can be created with general concepts in future studies. The key concept of the study was evaluated and discussed in the context of the theoretical framework.

## **6. Ethics approval**

This study does not require ethics committee approval.

## **7. Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## **8. Funding**

No funding was received for this study.

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