

PARENTS EDUCATION AND FUNCTIONING OF FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

STRUČNA SPREMA RODITELJA I FUNKCIONIRANJE OBITELJI DJECE SA INTELEKTUALNIM TEŠKOĆAMA

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ABSTRACT

The terms functionality and dysfunctionality are used to define the "normality" of the family, referring to patterns of organizing the family process. The study aims to examine the relationship between parents' educational attainment and the functioning of families of children with intellectual disabilities. The sample consisted of parents of children with intellectual disabilities of elementary school age ($N = 40$), of whom 28 were parents (70.0%) with completed primary school and 12 parents (30.0%) with completed high school. The Beavers Family Function Model was used to test family functioning, and the Family Inventory Scale of Family Inventory Version II was applied. The results of the study showed that of the 28 families with primary education parents, 7 (25.0) are functional and 21 (75.0) dysfunctional families. Of the families where parents indicated that they had a high school, 8 (66.6) were functional and 4 (33.3) dysfunctional families. Both groups achieve lower than average scores on all family dimensions, which means that they exhibit good competencies across all dimensions. The results of correlation showed that there is a weak negative correlation ($r = -0.323$; $p = 0.045$) that is, the lower the level of education, the greater the dysfunction in families. The obtained results should be taken with caution, since the parents' sub-samples are uneven and small concerning their education, and only one parent from the family participated in the research. To obtain a more complete picture of the functioning of families of children with intellectual disabilities, the identified shortcomings need to be addressed in future research.

Key words: family functioning, parent's education, children with intellectual disabilities

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SAŽETAK

Pojmovi funkcionalnost i disfunkcionalnost se koriste kako bi se odredila „normalnost“ obitelji, a odnose se na obrasce organizovanja obiteljskog procesa. Cilj istraživanja je ispitati povezanost nivoa stručne sprema roditelja i funkcioniranja obitelji djece sa intelektualnim teškoćama. Uzorak ispitanika činili su roditelji djece s intelektualnim teškoćama osnovnoškolskog uzrasta (N=40), od čega je 28 roditelja (70,0%) sa završenom osnovnom školom i 12 roditelja (30,0%) sa završenom srednjom školom. Za ispitivanje funkcioniranja obitelji korišten je Beavers model obiteljskog funkcioniranja, a primjenjena je Skala samoprocjene obiteljskog inventara - verzija II (eng. *Family Inventory Scale of Family Inventory Version II*). Rezultati istraživanja su pokazali da je, od 28 obitelji u kojima su roditelji s osnovnim obrazovanjem, 7 (25.0) funkcionalnih i 21 (75.0) disfunkcionalnih obitelji. Od obitelji u kojima su roditelji naveli da imaju srednju stručnu spremu, 8 (66.6) je funkcionalnih i 4 (33.3) disfunkcionalne obitelji. Obje skupine na svim obiteljskim dimenzijama postižu rezultate koji su niži od prosječnih, što znači da ispoljavaju dobre kompetencije na svim dimenzijama. Rezultati ispitivanja povezanosti su pokazali da postoji slaba negativna korelacija ($r=-0.323$; $p=0.045$), odnosno što je manji nivo obrazovanja to je veća disfunkcionalnost u obiteljima. Dobijene rezultate treba uzeti s oprezom jer su subzorci roditelja u odnosu na stručnu spremu neujednačeni i mali, te je u istraživanju sudjelovao samo jedan roditelj iz obitelji. Kako bi se dobila potpunija slika o funkcioniranju obitelji djece s intelektualnim teškoćama potrebno je u bućim istraživanjima otkloniti uočene nedostatke.

Ključne riječi: funkcioniranje obitelji, stručna sprema roditelja, djeca s intelektualnim teškoćama

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous definitions of families in the literature from which we can deduce that this is a system that is built. The question is how to build a family? Petrović (2009) states that the formation of a marital union is the first and most important step in the formation of a family (or family union). Udovčić (2015) points out that from a legal view, the family is a fundamental form of human community and family relations are a type of social relations crucial for the survival of the individual and the social community. The family is not a simple set of individuals but a complex system of interrelationships (Klarin, 2006). The author Keresteš (2002, p. 83, according to Wagner Jakab, 2008) emphasizes that the “family is a complex and connected whole, a hierarchically organized system consisting of smaller subsystems (marital, parental, siblings), and therefore the family community is a complex relationship between members who also have numerous social relationships outside their families”.

Mijatović (1995, according to Jurković, 2017) believes that the family has a very large, perhaps even crucial importance for the individual, but also society as a whole and that it is important for the smallest, but also adults.

The author points out that the child gains experience in it and builds his attitudes that he needs for life. For slightly older family members, it has a different meaning; adults understand it as a community whose foundations rest on friendship and love, where the individual can be what he is and develop his personality in such an environment. Therefore, marriage and the family are a place of security, of necessary mutual acceptance, where the individual can feel free and be unrestricted in his actions. The author further points out that no matter how hard society tries to take over some tasks of the family, it will never be able to completely replace it, nor find a close alternative to it.

A family must be functional to do its part of the "job" of educating and caring for all its members. Vukšić (2018) points out that functional families are those in which both mother and father strongly influence family life and invest their time and energy in shaping them. The author points out that in such families the boundaries are clearly defined and appropriate, and the need for individual privacy is respected. Communication is effective with the free expression of emotions, and there are optimism and humor in them. Ljubetić (2006, according to Vukšić, 2018) states that the basic characteristics of functional families are: open communication channels and willingness to cooperate, better preparedness to cope with stress, warm relationships within the family, trust in other people, self-confidence, free interactions with the environment, and more personal, family and external readiness.

As opposed to functional families, there are also dysfunctional families that result from a dysfunctional marriage and the unwillingness of the family to cope with the challenges it faces. Nikolić (2008, according to Vukšić, 2018) points out that normal family functions during its life cycle in four basic-areas, namely personal, marital, parental and socio-economic functioning. A family that does not function in one or all areas is dysfunctional.

Several models can be found in the literature for observing family functioning. Cicović Maslovar (2015) states that the multidimensional systemic view of family functioning is presented in three most commonly used models: Circumplex model, Mc. Master model and Beavers model. The Beavers model of family functioning was used to examine family functioning in this study. The Beavers model of family functioning (Beavers and Hampson, 2000) assesses two dimensions: family competencies and family-style. The results can be shown in a diagram. Family-style is represented on the vertical axis, which in this model can be centripetal or centrifugal, while on the horizontal axis the results for family competencies are entered. By crossing these two dimensions, nine groups of families can be obtained. Two groups are functional families (optimal and adequate) and seven groups are dysfunctional (medium-range families - centripetal, centrifugal and mixed; border families - centripetal and centrifugal; severely dysfunctional families - centripetal and centrifugal).

The family goes through a continuous process of identity building defined as "family life-cycle", so the term "developmental stage" is no longer applied to individual members, but the family as a whole, emphasizing the interdependence between individual-life cycle and family life cycle (Iacolino, Pellerone, Pace, Ramaci, & Castorina, 2016). The family life cycle affects different critical events that may be caused by various factors, such as departure or departure of the family by one spouse, the arrival of a new member (stepfather, stepmother), illness in the family, the birth of a child with a disability, etc. The birth of a child with a disability significantly affects both, family functioning and parents who are more prone to stress and mental health problems.

The family of people with disabilities often goes through periods of instability and disharmony, and the birth of a child with a disability can affect communication, problem solving, satisfaction, and the overall functioning of the family (Iacolino et al., 2016).

By studying the available literature, it is found that families with a child with a disability function differently. Research suggests that dysfunction is recorded in these families (Axelsson, Granlund & Wilder, 2013; Dyson, 1993; Fenning, J. Baker, B. Baker, & Crnic, 2007; Fenning, J. Baker, B. Baker & Crnic, 2014; Rani et al., 2018; Rieger & McGrail, 2013). Research on the functioning of families of children with disabilities mainly deals with the comparison of the functioning of families with and families without children with disabilities (Dyson 1993; Rani et al. 2018; Fenning et al., 2007; Fenning et al., 2014). Besides, the functioning of families with children with disabilities in general is mainly investigated, while very little research is focused on assessing the functionality of families with children with a particular type of disability. Research on the functioning of families is mainly focused on families with children with autism because it has been shown that they have a higher level of stress (Iacolino et al., 2016).

Several factors appear to influence the overall functioning of a family with a disabled child, including: the type of disability, the amount and nature of disability-related disorders, the structural and psychological characteristics of the family and the related motional, relational and educational dynamics, the socio-cultural level and the quantity and quality of social supports that the family has (Iacolino et al., 2016). Parents who experience higher parental stress perceive family cohesion lower and parents who are satisfied with marriage and social support of the immediate environment perceive family cohesion higher (Milić Babić, 2012).

The research mainly deals with the research of the mentioned factors and their influence on the functioning of families, while the research of factors by parents that can influence the functioning of the family is very small. Factors by parents of children with disabilities that could affect the functioning of the family are gender, age, education, education about the child's disability, etc. The impact of these factors on the functioning of the family should be checked in future research on this issue.

This research aims to examine the connection between the parent's education and the family functioning of children with intellectual disabilities. It is expected that there is a connection between parent's education and the family functioning of children with intellectual disabilities. Families of children with intellectual disabilities in which parents have a higher level of education will be more functional and vice versa.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Sample of participant

The sample consisted of parents of children with intellectual disabilities of primary school age (N = 40) whose children attend the Public Institution "Institute for Education of Persons with Mental and Physical Development Disabilities" in Tuzla and parents whose children are beneficiaries of the Primary School "Cazin II" - Center for the Development of Inclusive Practices in Cazin. The criteria for selecting the parents of children with intellectual disabilities was the diagnosis of intellectual disabilities (mild and moderate intellectual disabilities) in the child.

The sample is appropriate because the sample includes all parents of children with intellectual disabilities who were in these institutions. Concerning education, there were 28 parents (70.0%) with completed primary school, while 12 parents (30.0%) had completed secondary school.

Method of conducting research

After obtaining the necessary approvals, research was conducted in the area of the cities of Tuzla and Cazin. All parents, who made up the sample, gave their written consent to participate in the research and were made aware of the fact that the research was anonymous and that the data obtained would not be used for other purposes. The parents filled in the scale individually, after the principle of filling in the measuring instruments was explained to them.

Measuring instruments

Self-report Family Inventory scale version II – SFI (Beavers and Hampson, 1990, according to Beavers & Hampson, 2000) was used, which consists of 36 items. It is a Likert-type scale on which family members, in this case, parents, rate their family in the range of 1 to 5 (1 - YES, fits very well with my family; 3 - SOMETIMES, sometimes fits into my family; 5 - NO, does not fit into my family). If family members are unsure and think that this statement is between odd numbers, between YES and SOMETIMES or SOMETIMES and NO, they can round up even numbers between, respectively 2 or 4. SFI has a high internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha between 0.84 and 0.93 and test-retest reliability of 0.85 or better). SFI assesses 5 family dimensions: health/competencies (average score 57), conflict (average score 36), cohesion (average score 12), leadership (average score 9), and emotional expressiveness (average score 15). Lower results indicate higher competencies in all dimensions. Results achieved on the health/competence dimension are used to interpret the results of the SFI scale in the diagram which are entered on the horizontal axis, while the result on the vertical axis is entered on the cohesiveness dimension, which is used to assess family style. In this study, the value of Cronbach's Alpha was 0.79.

A General Questionnaire was also used, which was constructed for this research to take general information about parents.

Data processing methods

The data were analysed using the statistical program SPSS 21.0 for Windows. Responses of participants were represented by frequencies and percentages, as well as descriptive statistics. The correlation was examined by the Pearson correlation test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Groups of families of children with intellectual disabilities according to the Beavers model of family functioning concerning the education of parents

PE	Functional families		Dysfunctional families						
	OF	AF	CpMr	MMrF	MrCfF	BFCp	BFCf	SDCp	SDCf
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
PrE	0 (0.0)	7 (25.0)	11 (39.3)	6 (21.4)	2 (7.1)	1 (3.6)	-	1 (3.6)	-
	7 (25.0)		21 (75.0)						
SE	2 (16.7)	6 (50.0)	1 (8.3)	3 (25.0)	-	-	-	-	-
	8 (66.6)		4 (33.3)						

Legend: PE (parental education); PrE (primary education); SE (secondary education); OF (optimal families); AF (adequate families); CpMr (Centripetal mid-range type); MMrF (Mixed type of medium-range families); MrCfF (Medium Range Centrifugal Family); BFCp (Boundary families of centripetal type); BFCf (Borderline families of centrifugal type); SDCp (Severely dysfunctional centripetal families); SDCf (Severely dysfunctional centrifugal families)

In Table 1 it can be seen that, out of 28 parents with primary education, 7 (25.0) estimate that their families are functional and 21 (75.0) parents estimate that their families are dysfunctional. Of the 12 parents with secondary education, 8 (66.6) estimate that their families are functional and 4 (33.3) assess that their families are dysfunctional. More parents with secondary education compared to parents with primary education estimate that their families are functional. Parents with primary education in a larger number consider that their families are dysfunctional compared to parents with secondary education. The result is somewhat expected given the fact that there are more parents with primary education in the sample.

The functioning of the families of children with intellectual disabilities concerning the education of the parents was also analyzed in relation to the family dimensions, and the results are presented in Figure 1.

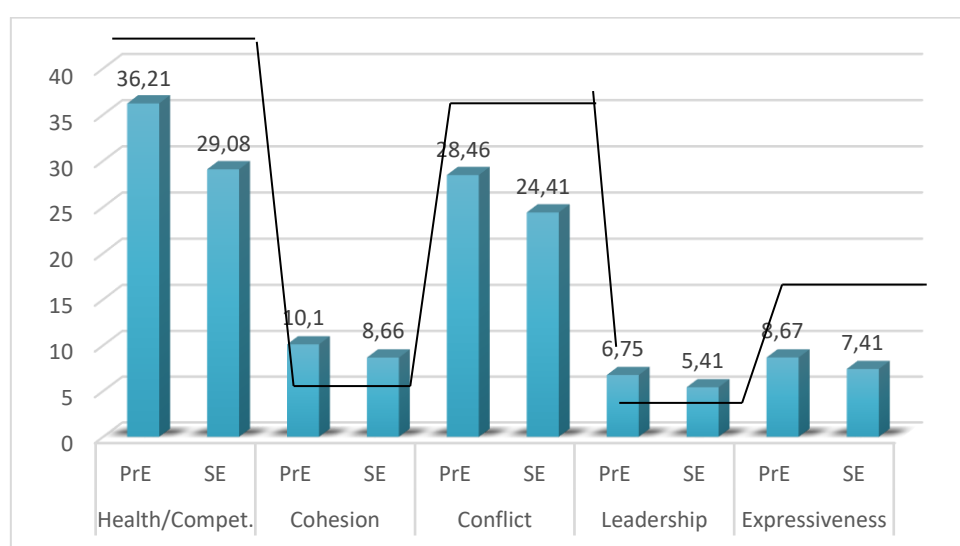


Figure 1. Distribution of parents' results on family dimensions concerning education of parents

The results presented in Figure 1 show that parents of both groups, parents with primary education and parents with secondary education, on all family dimensions achieve results that are lower than the average results of dimensions (results below the boundary line), which means that they show good competencies in all dimensions. If we look at the arithmetic means of all five dimensions, parents with secondary education in all dimensions achieve lower results (health/competencies AS = 29.08; cohesion AS = 8.66; conflict AS = 24.41; leadership AS = 5.41; expressiveness AS = 7.41) from parents with primary education (health/competencies AS = 36.21; cohesion AS = 10.10; conflict AS = 28.46; leadership AS = 6.75; expressiveness AS = 8.467). This means that they show somewhat better competencies in all five dimensions. Thus, parents with secondary education in the Health/Competences dimension show more happiness, optimism, problem solving, and negotiation skills, family love, the strength of parent coalitions, and emphasize autonomy, individuality and responsibility. On the Conflict dimension, they show a greater tendency to negotiate and accept personal responsibility in resolving conflicts, while on the Cohesion dimension they show a greater family closeness. On the Leadership dimension, parents with secondary education express strong and consistent patterns of adult leadership in the family, while on the Expressiveness dimension they express a greater sense of closeness and more expressions of positive feelings, warmth, and care.

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between education and the functioning of families of children with intellectual disabilities (Table 2).

Table 2. Relationship between the level of education of parents and the functioning of families of children with intellectual disabilities

		Parental education	Family functioning
Parental education	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.323*
	p		0.042
	N	40	40
Family functioning	Pearson Correlation	-0.323*	1
	p	0.042	
	N	40	40

The results presented in Table 2 show that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between the education of parents and the functioning of families of children with intellectual disabilities ($r = -0.323$, $p = 0.042$). This is a negative weak correlation, that is, inversely proportional, the lower the level of education, the greater the dysfunction in the family and vice versa, the higher the level of education, the better the functionality of the family. The obtained results are expected, and they are confirmed by the previously presented results where it could be seen that parents with secondary education in large numbers believe that their families are functional and show better competencies in all five family dimensions. There is no research on the impact of parental education of children with intellectual disabilities on the functioning of families in our region and beyond.

This fact is surprising given that research conducted among children of typical development shows that the level of education of parents affects the school success of children, their perception of family and family relationships. Thus, research conducted by Barušić, Babarović, and Marković (2010) indicates the existence of a real relationship between the achievement of students of typical development and the educational level of their parents. In all comparisons, students of more educated parents achieve statistically significantly better educational achievements. Research conducted by Zečević (2018) showed that children of more educated parents who attend regular educational institutions of their families and experience relationships in them are more intimate. Also, in this research, it was shown that the experience of family cohesion and adaptability is influenced by the education of the mother but not the father.

The results of these studies including this one show that parent's education is an important factor in the family functioning and the development of children. Therefore, it is necessary further investigate the impact of the education of parents of children with intellectual disabilities on the functioning of the family. Although this paper has shown that there is a connection between parental education and family functioning and that a lower level of education leads to greater family dysfunction, the results obtained should be taken with caution because parental subsamples are small compared to education and only parents with primary school and secondary education. The research should be repeated on larger subsamples of parents and include parents of other levels of education. Another limiting factor of this research is the fact that most mothers participated in it and that only they assessed the functioning of the family, so the question arises as to how credible the results obtained. Currently, the family is viewed as a system and their functioning depends on all the system elements. It would be interesting to compare family functioning assessments between mothers and fathers of children with intellectual disabilities. It would be also interesting to analyze individually the effects of mother's and father's education on the functioning of families of children with intellectual disabilities.

CONCLUSION

There is a statistically significant weak correlation between the level of parental education and the functioning of the families of children with intellectual disabilities so that a lower level of education also results in greater family dysfunction. Given the limitations of the research, which include small subsamples of parents concerning education, the representation of only two levels of education, mothers mainly participate in research, the results obtained should be checked in future research.

The results obtained in practical terms imply that parents with a lower level of education need systematic support at all stages of the family cycle. Educational and rehabilitation experts in working with families should pay special attention to the families of children with intellectual disabilities in which parents have a lower level of education because they need a higher level of support.

Family functioning is influenced by several factors that can be classified into three groups: factors by the parents, factors by the child with a disability, and the environmental factors. All these factors individually and in interaction affect the functioning of the family, and

therefore research on the functioning of the family of children with intellectual disabilities should include all these factors. Thus, systematic, extensive, and longitudinal research on this issue is lacking.

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