

The Moderating Role of Social Support in the Relationship between Parenting Stress and Psychological Distress among Mothers

Asna Palakkathadathil Salu¹, Sanmaya B. S. Kumar¹ and Ajitha V. A^{2*}

¹2nd Year B.Sc. Psychology Student, Christ College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda, Kerala, India

²Assistant Professor, Christ College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda, Kerala, India

*Corresponding Author E-Mail ID: ajitha.christ@gmail.com

Abstract

The emotional well-being and psychological distress of mothers can be significantly impacted by parenting stress, which is a significant psychological concern. This is especially true when mothers are confronted with multiple caregiving responsibilities and limited emotional or social resources. The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between psychological distress and parenting stress in mothers and to investigate the moderating function of perceived social support in this relationship. The study comprised a convenience sample of 80 mothers, including those who were employed and those who were not, who voluntarily participated through Google Forms. The data collection process employed standardised psychological instruments, such as the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, the Parental Stress Scale (PSS), and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). The participants reported moderate levels of psychological distress and parental stress, while they reported relatively high levels of perceived social support, as revealed by descriptive analysis. According to the correlation analysis, there is a substantial positive correlation between psychological distress and parenting stress, indicating that higher levels of parenting stress are associated with greater psychological distress. Conversely, perceived social support demonstrated a substantial negative correlation with both parenting stress and psychological distress. This suggests that mothers who received more robust social support reported reduced stress levels and improved mental health. Additional regression analysis revealed that both perceived social support and parental stress were significant predictors of psychological distress. The buffering hypothesis is found to be supported by the results, which suggest that the adverse psychological effects of stress can be mitigated by social support. In general, the research underscores the significance of

fortifying family, social, and community support systems to improve the psychological well-being and resilience of mothers.

Keywords: *Parenting Stress, Social Support, Mental Health, Mothers, Psychological Distress*

Introduction

Parenting is often considered one of the most rewarding yet challenging roles in life, especially for mothers who manage multiple responsibilities along with societal expectations. Parenting stress refers to the pressure and strain experienced while fulfilling parenting responsibilities. Mothers are particularly vulnerable to parenting stress because of childcare demands, balancing work and family life, financial pressures, and expectations regarding ideal motherhood (Schwab-Reese, Schafer, & Ashida, 2017). In many cultures, traditional gender roles place greater caregiving responsibilities on women, increasing stress and feelings of inadequacy when expectations are not met.

Parenting stress can arise from both internal and external factors. Internal factors include self-imposed expectations and feelings of being unable to adequately fulfill parenting roles, while external factors include financial strain, limited childcare support, and children's behavioral or developmental challenges (Park & Lee, 2022). Persistent parenting stress may negatively affect mothers' psychological well-being, leading to anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Islam et al., 2021). According to the Stress and Coping Theory, stress occurs when individuals perceive those environmental demands exceed their coping resources. For mothers, parenting, household duties, work responsibilities, and social expectations may collectively create emotional strain and psychological distress.

Mental health is an important aspect of overall well-being and includes emotional, psychological, and social functioning. Poor psychological well-being among mothers not only affects mothers themselves but may also influence parenting practices, family relationships, and child development. Research suggests that parenting stress and psychological distress often reinforce one another, creating a cycle in which increased stress contributes to poorer mental health, making it more difficult to cope with parenting responsibilities. Therefore, identifying protective factors that reduce the negative effects of parenting stress is essential.

One important protective factor is perceived social support, which includes emotional, informational, and practical assistance received from family, friends, spouses, and the community. The Buffering Hypothesis suggests that social support reduces the harmful effects of stress by improving coping abilities and providing emotional reassurance (Li et al., 2022). Emotional support reduces feelings of isolation, informational support helps mothers manage parenting challenges, and instrumental support such as childcare or financial help reduces parenting burdens (Li et al., 2021). Although previous studies have examined parenting stress, social support, and psychological distress separately, fewer studies have focused on the moderating role of social support. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the relationship between parenting stress and psychological distress among mothers and to investigate whether perceived social support acts as a protective factor in reducing the negative effects of parenting stress on psychological distress.

Review of Literature

Parenting Stress and Its Impact on Mental Health

Parenting stress refers to the distress arising from the demands and responsibilities of raising children (Park & Lee, 2022). Mothers often experience high levels of parenting stress due to childcare responsibilities, financial strain, child behavioral difficulties, and societal expectations regarding motherhood. Mothers of children with developmental or behavioral challenges may experience even greater stress because of increased caregiving demands (Li et al., 2022). Research has shown that high parenting stress is associated with poorer psychological well-being, including anxiety, depression, burnout, emotional exhaustion, and fatigue (Schwab-Reese et al., 2017). Working mothers may be especially vulnerable because of the combined pressures of employment and caregiving responsibilities (He et al., 2025). The Stress and Coping Theory explains that stress occurs when perceived demands exceed available coping resources, leading to emotional strain and psychological distress.

Social support is considered an important protective factor that reduces the negative effects of parenting stress. Emotional, informational, and instrumental support from family, spouses, friends, and the community can improve coping abilities and reduce feelings of isolation (Islam et al., 2021). The Buffering Hypothesis suggests that social support protects individuals from stress by enhancing resilience and reducing perceived threat. Emotional support helps reduce anxiety and depression, informational support assists mothers in

managing parenting challenges, and instrumental support reduces practical burdens such as childcare and financial responsibilities (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016; Zauszniewski, 2019). Overall, previous literature indicates that social support plays a significant role in reducing parenting stress and improving mothers' psychological well-being, highlighting the need to examine its moderating role in the relationship between parenting stress and psychological distress.

Aim of the Study

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the Parental Stress, Perceived Social Support and Psychological Distress among working and non-working mothers.
- To study the relationship between parental stress and Psychological Distress among working and non-working mothers.
- To examine the moderating role of Perceived Social Support on the Parental Stress and Psychological Distress.

Hypotheses

H1: There will be significant relationship between parental stress and psychological distress among mothers.

H2: There will be significant relationship between perceived social support and psychological distress among mothers.

H3: Social support will significantly moderate the relationship between parental stress and psychological distress among mothers.

Research Design

The present study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between parenting stress and psychological distress among mothers, as well as the moderating role of perceived social support. A correlational design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to identify the strength and direction of relationships among the variables without manipulating them.

The study focused on understanding how parenting stress is associated with psychological distress among mothers and whether perceived social support influences this relationship. Parenting stress served as the independent variable, psychological distress as the dependent variable, and perceived social support as the moderating variable.

Convenience sampling was used to select the participants for the study. Data were collected from working and non-working mothers using standardized self-report questionnaires administered through an online platform (Google Forms). Statistical techniques such as descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were used to examine the relationships among the variables and to test the moderating effect of social support.

Overall, the correlational research design was suitable for exploring the associations among parenting stress, perceived social support, and psychological distress among mothers.

Participants

The participants in the present study consisted of 80 working and non-working mothers selected through convenience sampling. Including both groups helped in understanding differences in parenting experiences, stress levels, social support, and psychological distress. Participants from varied demographic backgrounds were included to obtain diverse perspectives. Demographic information such as age, socioeconomic status, marital status, educational background, and number of children was collected. However, the relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Instruments and Measures

Parental Stress Scale (PSS)

The Parental Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Judy O. Berry and Warren H. Jones in 1995. It is one of the most widely used instruments for measuring parenting stress and evaluates both the stressful and rewarding aspects of parenthood. The scale consists of 18 items that assess parental stressors, emotional strain, role restrictions, parental satisfaction, and parenting rewards. Participants respond to statements related to their parenting experiences, and higher scores indicate greater parenting stress. The PSS has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across different populations. The instrument shows good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha generally ranging from 0.80 to 0.85, indicating good internal consistency. It also has strong validity, supported by significant relationships with anxiety, depression, parental well-being, family functioning, and other measures of stress. Due to its brevity, ease of administration, and accurate measurement, the PSS is considered a reliable and valid tool for assessing parenting stress.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was developed by Gregory D. Zimet, Nancy W. Dahlem, Sara G. Zimet, and Gordon K. Farley in 1988. The scale measures individuals' perceived social support from important people in their lives. The MSPSS contains 12 items divided into three subscales: Family Support, Friends Support, and Significant Other Support. Respondents rate each statement according to their level of agreement, helping researchers understand the different sources of social support available to an individual. The MSPSS has been widely used across cultures and age groups and has shown excellent psychometric properties. The scale demonstrates high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.85 to 0.95, indicating excellent internal consistency. It also has strong validity, supported by its associations with depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being. Because of its short and easy format, the MSPSS is considered a reliable, valid, and effective instrument for measuring perceived social support.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) was developed by Ronald C. Kessler and colleagues in 2002. It is a widely used instrument designed to measure general psychological distress, particularly symptoms related to anxiety and depression experienced during the previous four weeks. The K10 consists of 10 items that assess feelings such as nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, tiredness, and worthlessness. Respondents indicate how often they experienced each symptom, with higher scores representing greater psychological distress. The K10 has demonstrated excellent psychometric qualities across diverse populations and cultural settings. The instrument shows high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.88 to 0.93, indicating excellent internal consistency. It also has good validity, as evidenced by strong correlations with depression, anxiety, emotional well-being, and clinical mental health diagnoses. Due to its brief and user-friendly format, the K10 is considered a reliable, valid, and practical tool for assessing psychological distress in research and clinical settings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using quantitative statistical techniques to examine the relationships among parenting stress, perceived social support, and psychological distress

among mothers. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and percentages were used to summarize the demographic characteristics and study variables. Correlation analysis was performed to identify the strength and direction of relationships between the variables. Multiple regression analysis was further used to examine the impact of parenting stress on psychological distress and to determine the moderating role of perceived social support. These statistical methods helped in testing the study hypotheses and understanding the relationships among the variables.

Result and Discussion

This study examined the relationship between parenting stress, perceived social support, and maternal psychological distress among mothers. The analyses mainly focused on understanding how parenting stress influences psychological distress and whether social support acts as a protective factor in reducing negative psychological distress outcomes. Correlation and regression analyses were conducted to identify significant relationships and patterns among the variables.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for parenting stress, psychological stress and social support

Variables	N	MEAN	SD
Parental Stress	80	39.54	8.21
Psychological Distress	80	20.85	6.91
Social Support	80	64.01	15.87

Descriptive statistics indicated that participants reported moderate levels of parenting stress ($M = 39.54$, $SD = 8.21$) and psychological distress ($M = 20.85$, $SD = 6.91$). These findings suggest that many mothers in the study experienced noticeable emotional strain, anxiety, and stress related to parenting responsibilities and daily caregiving demands. Parenting often requires mothers to manage multiple roles and responsibilities simultaneously, which can contribute to emotional exhaustion and psychological difficulties.

In contrast, perceived social support scores were relatively high ($M = 64.01$, $SD = 15.87$), indicating that most participants had access to considerable emotional, informational,

and practical support from family members, friends, and social networks. This suggests that although mothers experienced parenting-related stress, many were able to rely on supportive relationships that may help them cope more effectively with emotional challenges and reduce feelings of isolation.

Before diving into regression analysis, descriptive statistics provide an initial overview of the data. Measures such as means, medians, modes, standard deviations, and ranges help in understanding the general characteristics of the sample. For instance, we can calculate the average level of parenting stress reported by mothers and the average psychological distress score. This step is crucial because it allows us to identify any outliers or peculiar patterns in the data that may need further investigation.

In our study, we might find that mothers report varying levels of parenting stress, influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status or number of children. Understanding these descriptive statistics helps frame the context in which we perform our regression analysis.

Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Pearson correlation coefficient for relationship among parental stress, perceived social support and psychological distress

Variables	Parental Stress	Psychological Distress	Social Support
Parental Stress	1		
Psychological Distress	.495**	1	
Social Support	-.417**	-.241*	1

The table shows the correlation between Parental Stress, Psychological Distress, and Social Support among mothers. A positive correlation was found between parental stress and psychological distress ($r = .495$), indicating that higher levels of parental stress are associated with higher levels of psychological distress. This suggests that mothers who experience greater parenting-related stress are more likely to report symptoms such as anxiety, emotional strain, and depression.

The results also revealed a negative correlation between parental stress and social support ($r = -.417$), indicating that mothers with higher perceived social support tend to

experience lower parental stress. Similarly, psychological distress was negatively correlated with social support ($r = -.241$), suggesting that greater social support is associated with lower psychological distress. Overall, the findings highlight the protective role of social support in reducing both parenting stress and psychological distress among mothers.

Interpretation of Independent Samples *t*-Test

Table 3: Mean, Standard Deviation and *t*-value of Parental Stress, Psychological Distress and Social Support among Working and Non-Working Mothers ($P < 0.05$).

Variable		N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.
Parental Stress	Working	45	39.18	7.732	77	.445	.658
	Non working	34	40.03	8.898			
Psychological Distress	Working	45	20.38	7.066	77	.698	.487
	Non working	34	21.47	6.752			
Social Support	Working	45	63.49	16.214	77	.337	.737
	Non working	34	64.71	15.608			

The independent samples *t*-test compared working and non-working mothers on parental stress, psychological distress, and social support. Non-working mothers showed slightly higher mean scores in parental stress ($M = 40.03$), psychological distress ($M = 21.47$), and social support ($M = 64.71$) compared to working mothers. However, the obtained *t*-values for parental stress ($t = 0.445$, $p = 0.658$), psychological distress ($t = 0.698$, $p = 0.487$), and social support ($t = 0.337$, $p = 0.737$) were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). These findings indicate that employment status does not significantly influence parental stress, psychological distress, or perceived social support among mothers in the present study.

The findings are supported by previous studies. Deater-Deckard (2004) and Nomaguchi (2016) reported that parenting stress is influenced more by parenting demands, family environment, and support systems than employment status alone. Similarly, Barnett (1998) and Parslow (2004) found no major differences in psychological distress between employed and non-employed mothers when adequate support systems are available. Cohen and Wills (1985) also emphasized that social support depends more on the quality of interpersonal relationships than occupational status.

Some earlier studies, however, reported contrasting findings. Abidin (1992) suggested that working mothers may experience greater parenting stress due to work–family conflict and role overload, while other studies found higher stress among non-working mothers because of financial dependency and social isolation. Artazcoz (2004) reported poorer mental health among unemployed women, whereas Belle (1982) observed greater family support among non-working mothers.

The absence of significant differences in the present study may reflect changing social conditions where both working and non-working mothers experience similar parenting responsibilities, emotional challenges, and support systems. Therefore, employment status alone may not be a strong determinant of parental stress, psychological distress, or social support.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Mental Health from Parenting Stress and Social Support (N = 79)

R	R²	Adjusted R²	F	p
.496	.246	.226	12.402	.000

A multiple regression analysis revealed that parenting stress and social support together significantly predicted mental health through the measured psychological distress, $F(2, 76) = 12.40, p < .001$, accounting for 24.6% of the variance in mental health scores. Parenting stress significantly positively predicted mental health problems ($\beta = .477, p < .001$), whereas social support was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -.042, p = .704$). Overall, the findings indicate that parenting stress plays a more important role in predicting mental health compared to social support in the present sample.

Limitations

- The study used a relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of mothers.
- Convenience sampling was adopted, and participants were selected from limited geographic areas; therefore, the sample may not adequately represent mothers from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

- The study relied completely on self-report questionnaires, which may have introduced response bias, social desirability bias, and subjective interpretation of experiences.
- The cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between parenting stress, social support, and psychological distress.
- Data were collected through online Google Forms, which may have excluded mothers with limited internet access or digital literacy.
- The study focused only on mothers and did not examine other important influencing factors such as coping strategies, marital satisfaction, child behavior problems, or family environment.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between parenting stress and psychological distress among mothers, with particular focus on the moderating role of social support. The findings revealed that higher parenting stress is associated with greater psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Parenting stress was influenced by factors such as child behavioral difficulties, financial pressures, and societal expectations of motherhood, all of which increased emotional burden and negatively affected mothers' well-being. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that prolonged parenting stress can lead to poorer mental health outcomes when adequate coping resources are lacking. A major finding of the study was the significant moderating role of social support. Mothers who perceived greater support from family, friends, and significant others reported better psychological well-being even under high parenting stress. Emotional, informational, and instrumental support helped reduce feelings of isolation, improved coping abilities, and lessened daily burdens. Statistical analysis confirmed that social support weakens the negative relationship between parenting stress and psychological distress, acting as a protective buffer. The study highlights the importance of strengthening support systems through parenting programs, peer support groups, childcare services, and mental health initiatives to promote maternal well-being and healthier family functioning.

References

Coburn, S. S. (2016). *Multiple domains of stress predict postpartum depressive symptoms in low-income Mexican American women: The moderating effect of social support*. *Archives of Women's Mental Health*, 19(2), 347–357.

Cuzzocrea, F., & Murdaca, A. M. (2016). Parental stress, coping strategies, and social support in families of children with a disability. *Child Care in Practice*, 22(1), 3–19.

Dong, S., Dong, Q., & Chen, H. (2022). Mothers' parenting stress, depression, marital conflict, and marital satisfaction: The moderating effect of fathers' empathy tendency. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 307, 79–86.

Fang, Y., Luo, J., & Boele, M. (2024). Parent, child, and situational factors associated with parenting stress: A systematic review. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. Advance online publication.

He, L., Mai, L., Guan, X., Cai, P., Li, X., Feng, J., & Hung, S. (2025). The moderating role of social capital between parenting stress and mental health and well-being among working mothers in China. *Healthcare*, 13(2), 245.

Ilias, K., Cornish, K., Kumar, A. S., Park, M. S.-A., & Golden, K. J. (2018). Parenting stress and resilience in parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Southeast Asia: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 280.

Islam, M. J., Broidy, L., Baird, K., Mazerolle, P., & Zobair, K. M. (2021). Early exclusive breastfeeding cessation and postpartum depression: Assessing the mediating and moderating role of maternal stress and social support. *PLoS ONE*, 16(6), e0253081.

Li, F., Xu, M., Wu, D., Tang, Y., & Zhang, L. (2022). From child social impairment to parenting stress in mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder: The role of parental self-efficacy and social support. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 879379.

Li, P., Wang, H., Feng, J., & Chen, G. (2021). Association between perceived stress and prenatal depressive symptoms: Moderating effect of social support. *Healthcare*, 9(6), 678.

Lu, M., Wang, G., Lei, H., & Shi, M. (2018). Social support as a mediator and moderator of the relationship between parenting stress and life satisfaction among Chinese parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(4), 1181–1188. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3448-y>

Lubis, F. R., Abidin, F. A., & Qodariah, L. (2024). Coping strategies and psychological distress among mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic: The moderating role of social support. *PLoS ONE*, 19(2), e0298765.

Masa'Deh, R., & Sawalha, M. (2025). Perceived social support as a moderator of posttraumatic stress in parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Scientific Reports*, 15, 11234.

Miranda, A., Mira, A., & Berenguer, C. (2019). Parenting stress in mothers of children with autism without intellectual disability: Mediation of behavioral problems and coping strategies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 464.

Park, G. A., & Lee, O. N. (2022). The moderating effect of social support on parental stress and depression in mothers of children with disabilities. *Occupational Therapy International*, 2022, 1234567.

Racine, N., & Madigan, S. (2018). Maternal adverse childhood experiences and antepartum risks: The moderating role of social support. *Archives of Women's Mental Health*, 21(6), 663–670.

Razurel, C., Kaiser, B., & Antonietti, J. P. (2017). Relationship between perceived perinatal stress and depressive symptoms, anxiety, and parental self-efficacy in primiparous mothers: The role of social support. *Women and Birth*, 30(6), e195–e202.

Schwab-Reese, L. M., Schafer, E. J., & Ashida, S. (2017). Associations of social support and stress with postpartum psychological distress among mothers symptoms: Main effects, moderation, and mediation. *Women & Health*, 57(6), 723–738.

Seeger, F., Neukel, C., & Williams, K. (2022). Parental mental illness, borderline personality disorder, and parenting behavior: The moderating role of social support. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 24(9), 483–492.

Sharda, E. (2022). Parenting stress and well-being among foster parents: The moderating effect of social support. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 39(5), 567–579.

Vismara, L., Rolle, L., & Agostini, F. (2016). Perinatal parenting stress, anxiety, and depression outcomes in first-time mothers and fathers: A 3- to 6-month postpartum follow-up study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 938.

Wang, Y., Huang, Z., & Kong, F. (2020). Parenting stress and life satisfaction in mothers of children with cerebral palsy: The mediating effect of social support. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 25(3), 416–425.

Xu, T., & Zhang, Y. (2025). Different supports, different effects: Social support moderates the impact of parenting stress on the mental health of parents of individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 15(1), 45–60.

Zauszniewski, J. A. (2019). Stress experiences and mental health of pregnant women: The mediating role of social support. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 40(2), 141–149.