

Faith of Our Fathers:

Exploring the Role of Faith, Spirituality and Religion as Support Among Fathers of Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing (DHH)

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

- The vital role fathers play in the lives of their children is well-established (Pruett, 2000).
- But, while fathers—including biological, step, foster, and others assuming a male influential role—are increasingly taking on active parenting responsibilities traditionally associated with mothers, parenting research has predominantly focused on mothers and other female caregivers (McBride & Mills, 1993).
- This imbalance between female and male caregivers is evident in disability-related research in general (Seligman & Darling, 2007), and also in studies exploring the role of faith (Parette & Trice, 1993).
- There is a notable scarcity of research concerning fathers of children who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH) compared to fathers of children with other disabilities (Dirks & Szarkowski, 2022; Brand, Zaidman-Zait, & Most, 2018).
- This study was guided by Pargament's (1997) religious coping theory that emphasizes the active role of individuals as they draw upon faith or religion to interpret and respond to major life stressors, such as parenting a child with a disability, including hearing loss.
- While research indicates that faith, spirituality, and religion can serve as a source of support for mothers of children with disabilities, there is limited research examining these factors among fathers (Poston & Turnbull, 2004; Zaidman-Zait & Young, 2008); research specific to fathers of children who are DHH on this topic is extremely limited (Ahlert & Greefe 2012; Zaidman-Zait et al., 2016).
- Professionals have a responsibility to assist families in identifying supports that can develop coping skills and enhance overall family functioning when parenting children with disabilities, including those who are DHH (Easler et al., 2025; Pedersen & Oltoff, 2019).
- This lack of literature regarding fathers makes it challenging for professionals to identify and cultivate resources that adequately support them (Poston & Turnbull, 2004).

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- The purpose of this study is to better understand the supporting role of faith, spirituality, and religion in the lives of fathers parenting children who are DHH.
- The results of the study can provide information about how fathers of children who are DHH use aspects of faith, spirituality, and religion as supportive strategies when parenting. These findings can then inform the field in terms of action steps for family support professionals and on how the current results fit into the overall literature base on empowering families of children with disabilities to parent in healthy family environments (Seligman & Darling, 2007; Kyzar et al., 2012).
- The research questions posed in the study were, To what degree do fathers of children who are DHH perceive their faith, spirituality and religion as a support in parenting?, and What specific beliefs and practices do fathers of children who are DHH use to navigate parenting a child who is DHH and in what ways are these beliefs and practices supportive?

METHODOLOGY

- A mixed methods sequential approach was used.
- First an electronic survey instrument was developed to gather quantitative demographic data and religious coping perceptions. The BRIEF RCOPE is a 14-item measure of religious coping with major life stressors, such as parenting a child with a disability. It is the most commonly used measure of religious coping found in the literature but is limited to the US and Europe and largely to the Christian faith (Pargament et al., 2011).
- Next, a focus group was formed of 13 of the 25 fathers who had completed the survey. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, this discussion sought to expand and clarify the answers provided in the quantitative data.
- Focus group data were transcribed and then analyzed using deductive coding procedures (Creswell & Clark, 2017) for aspects aligned with components of the BRIEF RCOPE.

FINDINGS

- Findings represent the data for the state of North Dakota, a mostly rural upper midwestern state in the U.S.

QUANTITATIVE

- A total of 25 fathers completed the electronic survey.
 - 21 hearing, 4 HH
 - 21 married, 2 single, 1 cohabitating, 1 divorced
 - 15 Black, 9 white, 1 Latino
 - 8 had children with additional disabilities
- RCOPE (1=not at all, 2=somewhat, 3=quite a bit, 4=a great deal)

Positive Religious Coping Subscale Items	Mean (±SD)
Looked for a stronger connection with God. (COPING TO FIND COMFORT & CLOSENESS TO GOD)	3.2 (±1.08)
Sought God's love and care. (COPING TO FIND COMFORT & CLOSENESS TO GOD)	3.32 (±0.94)
Sought help from God in letting go of my anger. (COPING TO SEEK A LIFE TRANSFORMATION)	3.04 (±1.02)
Tried to put my plans into action together with God. (COPING TO GAIN CONTROL)	3.32 (±0.90)
Tried to see how God might be trying to strengthen me in this situation. (COPING TO FIND MEANING)	3.12 (±0.97)
Asked forgiveness for my sins. (COPING TO FIND COMFORT & CLOSENESS TO GOD)	3.16 (±1.10)
Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems. (COPING TO FIND COMFORT & CLOSENESS TO GOD)	2.8 (±1.0)

Negative Religious Coping Subscale Items	Mean (±SD)
Wondered whether God had abandoned me. (STRUGGLING TO FIND COMFORT & CLOSENESS TO GOD)	2.04 (±1.05)
Felt punished by God for my lack of devotion. (STRUGGLING TO FIND MEANING)	2.08 (±1.03)
Wondered what I did for God to punish me. (STRUGGLING TO FIND MEANING)	1.76 (±0.83)
Questioned God's love for me. (STRUGGLING TO FIND COMFORT & CLOSENESS TO GOD)	1.84 (±0.98)
Wondered whether my church had abandoned me. (STRUGGLING TO GAIN INTIMACY WITH OTHERS & CLOSENESS TO GOD)	1.68 (±0.74)
Decided the devil made this happen. (STRUGGLING TO FIND MEANING)	2.04 (±1.30)
Questioned the power of God. (STRUGGLING TO FIND MEANING)	1.68 (±0.98)

QUALITATIVE

Coping Aspect	Frequency Count	Example Father Quote
Seeking Comfort & Closeness to God	14	"Well, when you don't know what to do or where to turn, God is a good place to start."
Seeking Life Transformation	6	"I really prayed hard for things to get better and it helped me feel relaxed and hopeful, I don't think the doctors did enough to keep me calm but my faith did!"
Gaining Control	13	"I now pray a lot more often, seeking direction and guidance in my actions."
Finding Meaning	9	"The first time that I realize my child is deaf, I got stress and did not know what to do next. I turned to prayer and seek religious guidance. I questioned God a lot, like 'why did this have to happen to me?' but at long last I had to accept the outcome after religious intervention."
Seeking Intimacy with Others & God	5	"Our church has always been supportive of (my child), giving a lot of support as she does faith formation classes and received her sacraments. She is an altar server and they are very supportive of her and always make her feel included" "I had a lot of talks with my grandma in those early months and she was always reminding me of Bible verses and ways that God was present to help us through it."

CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

- This sample of North Dakota fathers use faith and/or religion as positive coping as they parent their children who are DHH, particularly to find comfort and to gain control.
- The fathers in this sample demonstrate overall low levels of struggle related to their faith and religion in the context of parenting a child who is DHH; however, some relative struggle was indicated in finding meaning such as feeling punished by God for a lack of devotion.
- Fathers in this sample indicated they did not question the power of God nor did they feel abandoned by their church/faith community.
- The fathers indicated they used faith and religion as a means to temper emotional reactions; praying not only for guidance, but acceptance, tolerance and peace.
- The importance of a faith community, including extended family members who had strong faith traditions was also emphasized with these fathers as a source of support.
- These preliminary findings suggest that family support personnel can empower fathers by exploring and recognizing the potential role of faith and spirituality in navigating the parenting role. As recommended by Easler et al., 2025, this can be accomplished by, designing family-centered services that focus on both individual father and family strengths, engaging in faith-based conversations when appropriate, and recognizing how parents' faith can influence their sense of control over adverse situations and leverage this as a natural family support.
- Data collection in other U.S. states is in progress.

REFERENCES



THE GIFT OF SONG

It was a crisp February day and the new parents were excitedly awaiting their child's first. It wasn't her first word, stop or tooth, but her first day with her hearing aids. Her father thought back on the days that led to this moment. She was born in June, no longer then a ruder and weighing just over a pound. He and his wife spent months at the hospital caring for their daughter. Between the feedings and baths, he would rock with his daughter and sing to her until they both fell asleep. He knew before they took her home in October that her hearing was bad, but that didn't stop him from sharing his gift of song.

Every night when he would come home from work and, when his wife would go to bed, he would stay up with his daughter and rock in the chair. As they would rock, he would sing, he sang every song that would come to mind. Sometimes, when she was fussy, he would get up and walk around. As he did, she would rest herself under his chin so she could feel the vibrations from his throat. They would do this every night until she went to sleep.

Now, sitting in the doctor's office, they waited. Eagerly anticipating the reaction their daughter would have when the hearing aids were put in and turned on. Not to anyone's surprise, she began to cry from all the new noises in the room. Her father took her in his arms and began to do what he had been doing every night—he began to sing. But this time was different for his daughter. Instead of resting under his chin, she placed her ear next to his mouth. And for the first time in nine months, she truly heard her father's gift of song.

Heavenly Father,
We give you thanks for all our many gifts. We eagerly await the coming of your son so we can once again hold him in our arms and share with him our gift of song.

Amen