AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

The presence of a mentally retarded child jeopardizes family dynamics, child-rearing practices, and time utilization and communication networks by posing as a source of chronic burden to its members (Venkatesan and Snehalata, 1997).

Mental retardation is a permanently handicapping condition reported to be occurring in about two to three percent of the general population in our country. The presence of a mentally retarded child in the family is a source of chronic burden particularly to the parents of such children (Warde, 1991; Sheshadri et al., 1983; Hariasara, 1981).

Owing to the unique status-role position of mothers in the context of Indian families, their felt insecurities and burden are reported to be even higher than other family members (Tangri and Verma, 1992; Sequiera et al., 1990; Singh, 1990; Srivastava, 1990). Further, the attitudinal structure and valence as well as the personality profiles of family members undergo imperceptible transformations at deeper levels (Chaturvedi and Malhotra, 1984; Srivastava, 1978). Under these circumstances, there is a need to elicit the subjective cognitions in parents of children with mental retardation. It is possible that such cognitions may interfere in the optimal home management and supportive rehabilitation that parents need to provide for these handicapped children.

The focus of the present study is a comparison between parents of mentally retarded children and parents of normal children in terms of stresses experienced in meeting the daily needs of the mentally retarded children, stresses experienced while performing various social and family roles, coping styles adopted by the parents, their psychological well-being and marital adjustment.

Hidden behind every family of a mentally retarded child there is a continued struggle which parents try to undergo to cope up with the special
situation of having a child with disability. The challenges may amount to adjusting their whole life style to the changing special needs of the child and the family, restructuring their roles and expectations from the child, intra familial and inter familial adjustments, the stress of building and adjusting relationships with others.

Having a mentally retarded child causes a great amount of stress to the family and calls for life long adjustments on the part of the parents and other family members. It sometimes becomes difficult for parents to meet the needs if the mentally retarded child as also the needs related to family functioning as a whole. The entire family including parents, brothers and sisters and extended family members such as grand parents get affected in specific ways because of having a mentally retarded child in the family.

Although it is obvious that parents of mentally retarded children experience higher degrees of stress very few comparative studies are made with reference to types of stresses experienced by the parents of mentally retarded children and normal children. Therefore, this kind of study would prove to be helpful to determine the degree of stress experienced by parents.

Coping behavior or the things that parents do to reduce the stress have been a variable that has also recently become the focus of research. How parents cope with stress may be more important than the frequency or severity of stress. Depending upon the results, modifications of ways of coping or interventions could be suggested.

The parents of mentally retarded children are at a greater risk of developing marital problems. Marital difficulties may arise because of the conflicts between parents on sharing the additional demands for caring of the child, they may start blaming each other for producing such a child, may disagree between themselves about the treatment of the child or fear of producing another such child.
It is logical to think that if stress is associated with parenting a handicapped child the marital relationship will be vulnerable to the effects of that increased stress as well.

Parents of mentally retarded children tend to score less on marital adjustment in comparison to parents of non-mentally retarded children. Both parents (i.e. father and mother) play a crucial role in meeting the extra demands placed on the family because of having a mentally retarded child. Whatever little research has been done has actually focussed only on the issues of relative divorce rate and marital satisfaction. A study of this kind would be helpful to compare the marital adjustment of parents (i.e. father and mother) of mentally retarded children and parents (i.e. father and mother) of normal children.

Parents of mentally retarded children tend to score less on psychological well-being in comparison to parents of normal children. The mentally retarded child introduces new responsibilities in the family and parents are forced to acquire a new identity. The guilt of having born such a child, the social stigma that attaches themselves on the family, the shame of a retarded child misbehaving in the public and frustration and helplessness felt at not being able to “cure” the child, all affect the psychological well-being of the parents of the mentally retarded children. A study of this kind would be helpful to compare the psychological well-being of parents (i.e. father and mother) of mentally retarded children and parents (i.e. father and mother) of normal children.

Therefore, the present investigation was carried out with the following objectives:

1. To compare the stresses experienced by both parents of mentally retarded children with the parents of normal children.
2. To compare coping strategies adapted by parents of mentally retarded children and parents of normal children.
4. To compare marital adjustments made by parents of mentally retarded children and parents of normal children.

5. To compare psychological well-being of parents of mentally retarded children and parents of normal children.

HYPOTHESES

Based upon review of literature, the following hypotheses were proposed.

1. Parents of mentally retarded children were expected to score higher on daily stress (chronic sorrow), social and family stress, life event stress and stress symptoms than parents of normal children.

2. Parents of mentally retarded children were expected to score higher on emotion focused coping than problem focused coping in comparison to parents of normal children.

3. Parents of mentally retarded children were expected to score lower on marital adjustment than parents of normal children.

4. Parents of mentally retarded children were expected to score lower on psychological well-being in comparison to parents of normal children.