

- **Name of the study:** The Contribution of Parental and Familial Characteristics to Adjustment of Siblings to Child with a Disability in Orthodox Community in Israel
- **Year:** 2025
- **Type of research:** Master's thesis
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- **Research Authority:** Bar-Ilan University

## Abstract

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Growing up with a sibling who has a disability is a formative life experience with complex direct and indirect implications for psychological adaptation throughout the life cycle, particularly during childhood and adolescence. Studies that examined the psychological adaptation of siblings of children with disabilities (hereafter, "siblings of children with disabilities") have presented mixed findings. While some studies point to negative implications of the sibling experience, others highlight its positive outcomes. Family characteristics have been identified in the literature as contributing to the coping abilities of members of families with children with disabilities and family resilience, which encompasses beliefs, family organization, and family communication. Additionally, parental characteristics, such as attachment style, have been linked in the literature to the adaptation of family members, as has parental stress.

In the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) community in Israel, the high prevalence of children with disabilities and high fertility rates increases the population of siblings of children with disabilities. To date, only one study has examined the coping mechanisms of siblings of children with disabilities in the Haredi sector in American communities, and it was limited to adult siblings.

Considering this knowledge gap, the purpose of this study was to employ an integrative model based on Wallander's (1989) risk and resilience model to investigate the relationships between family resilience, parental stress, and maternal attachment style and the psychological adaptation of siblings of children with disabilities in the Haredi community compared to siblings of those without disabilities.

The questionnaires were distributed online or manually, depending on the mother's preference and access to online information. The questionnaires were disseminated through social networks and snowball sampling. This study was a cross-sectional quantitative study. The research population included Haredi mothers of a child with a neurodevelopmental disability aged two to 18 and at least one child without a disability aged 6 to 18 ( $M = 9.95$ ,  $SD = 3.27$ ) (hereafter, 'mothers of children with disabilities' group). The comparison group included Haredi mothers of two or more children without disabilities in the same age range ( $M = 10.12$ ,  $SD = 3.34$ ), matched

by gender and age. The study included 160 mothers, 92 in the research group and 68 in the comparison group. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires on parental stress, maternal attachment style, family resilience, and sibling adaptation in addition to a demographic questionnaire.

The following findings emerged when the differences and similarities between the research groups were examined. The first research hypothesis proposed that mothers of children with disabilities would experience higher levels of parental stress than mothers of children without disabilities. This hypothesis was confirmed. A significant difference was found in the level of parental stress between the research groups, with mothers of children with disabilities at the higher end of the scale than mothers without children with disabilities.

The second research hypothesis states that there will be a difference between the attachment style of mothers to a child with a disability and the attachment style of mothers to a child without a disability, so that the attachment style of mothers to a child without a disability will be safer compared to mothers of a child without a disability. This hypothesis was not confirmed. In the current study, no differences were found between the study groups in the mothers' anxious attachment or avoidant attachment.

The third hypothesis stated that family resilience measures (belief systems, family organization patterns, and family communication and problem-solving) would be higher in mothers of children with disabilities than mothers of children without disabilities. The current study's findings did not support this hypothesis. No differences were found in family resilience measures between the research groups. The fourth research hypothesis stated that the adaptation measures of siblings of children with disabilities would be lower than that of siblings of children without disabilities. The findings of the current study did not support this hypothesis. No differences were found in psychological adaptation measures between the research groups. The study's findings pointed to several key relationships between the research variables.

Hypothesis 5.1 stated that there would be a negative relationship between parental stress levels and sibling adaptation, suggesting that higher parental stress levels correspond to lower levels of sibling adaptation. This hypothesis was not supported; the current study found no connection between parental stress levels and sibling adaptation. Hypothesis 5.2 stated that there would be a positive relationship between maternal anxious attachment and sibling adaptation difficulties, indicating that the more anxious the mother's attachment, the greater the sibling's adaptation difficulties. This hypothesis was confirmed. However, contrary to this hypothesis, no significant relationships were found between maternal avoidant attachment and sibling adaptation difficulties.

Hypothesis 5.3 stated that there would be a positive relationship between family resilience and sibling adaptation, suggesting that higher levels of family resilience would correspond to

better sibling adaptation. This hypothesis was partially confirmed. As hypothesized, a significant positive relationship was found between the subscales of family organization patterns and family communication/problem-solving, as well as the general resilience measure and sibling adaptation. These findings indicate that higher levels of these resilience components correspond to better sibling adaptation. However, contrary to the hypothesis, no relationship was found between the beliefs' subscale and sibling adaptation in either research group. In other words, a correlational relationship was found between maternal anxious attachment style, general family resilience, and the subscales of family organization patterns and family communication/problem-solving and the psychological adaptation of siblings of children with or without disabilities. However, no relationship was found between parental stress, avoidant attachment, or the beliefs subscale and the psychological adaptation of siblings in either research group.

Hypothesis 5.4, which suggested examining a multivariate model for predicting adaptation difficulties, was partially confirmed. Only attachment style was found to predict sibling adaptation when the model variables were considered. Specifically, anxious attachment predicted lower sibling adaptation. No relationship was found between avoidant attachment and sibling adaptation.

Research hypothesis 6.1 which stated that the research group will moderate the relationship between parental stress and sibling adjustment, so that among mothers raising a child with a disability, parental stress will be associated with high levels of sibling adjustment difficulties, and among mothers raising a child without a disability, parental stress will be associated with Low levels of adjustment difficulties, was confirmed. However, the direction of the moderation was contrary to what was expected. Specifically, in the group of siblings of children with disabilities, a significant positive relationship was found between parental stress and siblings' healthy functioning (absence of adaptation difficulties). In contrast, high parental stress in families without children with disabilities was associated with greater sibling adaptation difficulties.

Hypothesis 6.2, which stated that family resilience would moderate the relationship between parental stress and sibling adaptation, So when the levels of family resilience are low, the relationship between parental stress and adjustment difficulties will be higher than when the levels of family resilience are high, was refuted. In the current study, contrary to the hypothesis, family resilience was not found to be a moderating factor in the relationship between parental stress and sibling adaptation in the family.

The study's findings highlight the impact on children without disabilities of being raised with siblings with disabilities. Children without disabilities tend to experience an ongoing lack of visibility, particularly in situations of high-intensity parental stress. This lack of visibility can lead to underdiagnosis and parental neglect on the one hand and the development of placation mechanisms on the other. This study is among the first to research siblings for a child with a

disability in ultra-Orthodox society in general, and even examined for the first time the relationship between mothers' attachment style and parental pressure to adapt to siblings in particular. At the theoretical level, the current study contributes to the understanding of the unique family dynamics in ultra-Orthodox society. At the practical level, insights that emerged from the research findings may help locate and identify siblings of a child with a disability who are at risk, and develop therapeutic options for mothers and siblings from this population for a beneficial mental adjustment.

### **Keywords**

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Child with Disabilities, Siblings of Children with Disabilities, Parental Stress, Attachment Style, Adjustment Difficulties, Family Resilience, Haredi-community (ultra-Orthodox-Jewish)

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