

Title: "Empowering Parents of Children with Cerebral Palsy: Impact of the Fav-Words Framework in Pakistan"

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ABSTRACT

Childhood disability in Pakistan exists within a complex socio-cultural matrix where stigma, silence, and misperception often overshadow the actual needs and potential of children with developmental disorders, such as cerebral palsy. In such contexts, parental understanding tends to be shaped by deficit-based perspectives emphasizing what the child cannot do rather than recognizing inherent abilities or future possibilities. This study set out to challenge these perceptions by introducing parents to the F-words for Child Development framework, a strengths-based approach grounded in the ICF model, which centers on Function, Family, Fitness, Fun, Friends, and Future. Through a structured intervention that included awareness sessions and pre- and post-intervention interviews, the research illuminated a profound shift in how parents began to perceive their children's disabilities. Thematic analysis revealed that the F-words framework not only reframed disability as an opportunity for growth and participation but also encouraged families to reimagine their caregiving roles. From initial expressions of grief, guilt, and helplessness, many parents evolved toward a language of empowerment, agency, and hope placing the child's strengths and aspirations at the heart of caregiving

narratives. These findings underscore the transformative potential of contextually sensitive interventions that focus on capacity rather than limitation. By engaging with the F-words framework, parents were not simply informed; they were inspired. Their narratives moved from silence to advocacy, from marginalization to inclusion. This change was not just cognitive it was deeply emotional and relational, fostering a renewed sense of purpose and possibility within the family system. In a country where cultural beliefs and limited rehabilitative infrastructure often hinder progress, this study affirms that transformative change can begin with something as fundamental as a shift in perspective. When families are given the tools to reframe disability through a lens of dignity, strength, and potential, the ripple effects extend beyond the child to society at large. The F-words framework, thus, emerges as a powerful catalyst for inclusive thinking one that challenges stigma and builds pathways toward holistic well-being.

Keywords

F-words, disability, cerebral palsy, Pakistan, parental empowerment, family-centered care, qualitative research, inclusion, child development, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Childhood is often celebrated as a time of growth and exploration, yet for many children with disabilities, this phase is marred by barriers that impact their participation and development. Disabilities in childhood may arise from a variety of causes, including genetic factors, birth trauma, or environmental conditions, and they affect children across physical, cognitive, emotional, and social domains (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011). While some disabilities are temporary and mild, others are profound and lifelong. In Pakistan, societal responses to disability are often shaped by stigma, religious beliefs, and misinformation, which

compound the functional challenges experienced by the child and their family (Shakespeare, 2014). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including Pakistan, children with disabilities frequently face social exclusion, discrimination, and denial of basic rights such as education and healthcare. Instead of being viewed as unique individuals with abilities, they are often considered burdens or divine punishments (Miles, 2011). This cultural stigma not only isolates families but also limits access to early interventions and supportive services (Groce, 2013). Parents particularly mothers are burdened with emotional distress, social blame, and the pressure to conceal their child's disability (Yousafzai et al., 2011). These circumstances create a cycle of silence and inaction, further marginalizing the child and impeding their development. Globally, the approach to childhood disability is shifting from a deficit-based medical model to a more inclusive and holistic framework. The WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) introduced a bio-psycho-social model that emphasizes not just impairments but also the environmental and personal contexts that shape a child's experience (WHO, 2001). Building on the ICF, Rosenbaum and Gorter (2012) developed the "F-words for Child Development" Function, Family, Fitness, Fun, Friends, and Future as a way to promote strength-based, family-centered care. This framework encourages caregivers and professionals to focus on what children can do, rather than what they cannot. The F-words framework has shown promise in fostering empowerment, inclusion, and hope among families of children with disabilities in various cultural contexts (Cross et al., 2019; Maleki et al., 2024). It facilitates a reframing of disability from a fixed medical condition to a dynamic journey of growth and participation. For families, especially in LMICs, the F-words offer a culturally adaptable tool to challenge stigma and promote self-advocacy (Rosenbaum & Gorter, 2012). Though well-documented in Western contexts, there is limited research on its effectiveness and adaptation within the socio-cultural landscape of Pakistan.

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how the F-words framework can transform parental perspectives in Pakistan. By introducing and evaluating the impact of a structured F-words awareness session among caregivers of children with cerebral palsy (CP), the research investigates whether parents' attitudes shift from a deficit-based model to a strength-based, participatory mindset. The study positions parental narratives as central to understanding how cultural, emotional, and environmental factors shape the caregiving experience. It also explores how these narratives can be redirected toward advocacy, inclusion, and dignity through the lens of the F-words.

METHOD AND MATERIAL:

This qualitative interventional study explored the impact of the F-words for Child Development framework; Function, Family, Fitness, Fun, Friends, and Future, on the perspective of Pakistani parents of children with cerebral palsy. The study aimed to shift parental thinking from a deficit-based perspective to a strengths-based outlook through a structured awareness session and pre- and post-intervention interviews. Guided by the qualitative structure established by Maleki et al. (2024), the study used semi-structured interviews based on the six F-words domains.

To ensure the framework's cultural relevance, a try-out phase was conducted before the main study. It involved expert feedback and a pilot session with two parents, confirming the clarity and appropriateness of the tools. In the main phase, 20 parents were recruited through purposive sampling from the National Institute of Special Education, Islamabad. The intervention consisted of a 3-hour training session conducted in Urdu and Pashto, using tools like the F-words Agreement (Kay), Profile (Brocklehurst), Collage (Grahovac), and Goal Sheet (Fuller & Susini, 2015), developed by CanChild's research team. These tools enabled parents

to personalize the F-words framework to their child's unique needs, promoting family-centered and participatory planning (Rosenbaum & Gorter, 2012).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze pre- and post-interview transcripts following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. Themes were coded and refined to reflect shifts in parental perspectives. Validation of themes was achieved through consultation with supervisors and peer researchers to ensure credibility and coherence. Findings revealed that parents moved from viewing their child as dependent and impaired to seeing them as capable, hopeful individuals with meaningful roles and goals. The training encouraged shared caregiving, acknowledged play as developmental, and emphasized realistic planning for the child's future.

All research procedures were ethically approved by the Directorate General of Special Education Islamabad and aligned with APA's ethical guidelines (APA, 2020). Participants provided informed consent and were interviewed in their preferred languages. Special care was taken to ensure cultural sensitivity, confidentiality, and emotional safety throughout the research process.

RESULTS

The results of this study clearly align with and justify its primary objectives demonstrating the impact of the Fav-words for Child Development framework in reshaping parental perspectives through a comparison of pre- and post-intervention interviews. The data reveals a compelling shift from deficit-based to strength-based thinking across all six domains of the F-words: Function, Family, Fitness, Fun, Friends, and Future. Prior to the intervention, caregivers often expressed feelings of helplessness, emotional fatigue, and uncertainty about their children's abilities and futures. However, following the Fav-words awareness session, parents began

identifying their children's strengths, setting realistic developmental goals, and viewing their roles with renewed clarity and confidence. The transformation reflected not only increased understanding but also a deeper emotional and cognitive engagement with the idea that their children could grow, learn, and participate meaningfully in daily life.

TABLE

F-words Domain	Pre-Intervention (Deficit-Based Thinking)	Post-Intervention (Strength-Based Thinking)	Key Shift Reflecting Study Objectives
Function	Total dependence, no clear goals, confusion about expectations	Identified strengths, goal-setting for daily tasks, increased autonomy	Parents reframed abilities and set realistic goals
Family	Overburdened caregivers, emotional burnout, isolation	Shared caregiving, emotional bonding, unity	Family viewed as a supportive, empowered system
Fitness	Inactivity, inaccessible therapy, missed milestones	Active participation in daily physical routines, child-led progress	Movement seen as achievable and meaningful
Fun	Passive entertainment (TV/phones), undervalued play	Purposeful play used for development and bonding	Fun integrated into therapy and emotional growth
Friends	Social isolation, no peer interaction, fear of exclusion	Intentional socialization, peer goals, emotional connection	Friendship recognized as vital for development
Future	Fear, uncertainty, no planning or aspirations	Hopeful planning, educational and vocational goals	Future viewed with optimism and proactive direction

This table captures the essence of how caregivers' perspectives shifted across all domains, supporting the objectives of the study.

This shift extended beyond the individual child to the family unit as a whole. Initially, caregiving was experienced as an isolating and overwhelming responsibility, often shouldered by one person typically the mother or grandmother. But after the intervention, families began to perceive themselves as collaborative and emotionally supportive systems. Fathers, siblings,

and even extended family members emerged as active contributors in the caregiving process, helping to foster the child's development through shared routines, encouragement, and affection. This evolution from emotional exhaustion to a shared sense of purpose highlighted the powerful influence of the Fav-words in redefining caregiving as a collective, strength-based effort. The domain of fitness also saw a major transformation. Where previously parents associated physical development solely with formal therapy often inaccessible due to cost or distance they now began incorporating movement and physical activity into everyday life. From walking with assistance to playful water-based activities, physical progress was reframed as attainable and joyful. Play, once passive and screen-dependent, became a tool for development, expression, and emotional bonding. Parents discovered that fun could be purposeful, using everyday interactions like clapping, storytelling, or singing as therapeutic moments that promoted both growth and connection.

Lastly, the concepts of friendship and future, which had once elicited fear and sadness, began to inspire hope and planning. Before the intervention, many children had little to no peer interaction, and parents avoided thinking about the future due to anxiety and uncertainty. Post-intervention, however, families began to value social inclusion as a developmental goal and to articulate aspirations for their children's education, independence, and societal contribution. By the end of the study, caregivers were not only more optimistic but also more proactive, viewing themselves as capable facilitators of change. This comprehensive shift across all six domains confirms that the Fav-words framework successfully fostered a strengths-based mindset among parents, ultimately transforming how they perceived both their children and their own roles in their developmental journeys.

DISCUSSION

The findings affirm that even brief, low-resource interventions can catalyze substantial cognitive and emotional shifts in parents of children with CP. The culturally adaptable Fav-words framework enabled families to reimagine disability through a lens of possibility, agency, and planning. These results echo findings from Rosenbaum & Gorter (2012) and Maleki et al. (2024), who documented similar perceptual shifts using the Fav-words in Western and Iranian contexts, respectively. The study's alignment with WHO's (2001) emphasis on holistic child functioning further reinforces its global relevance. While the framework inspired renewed hope, participants still cited persistent systemic barriers: lack of access to physiotherapy, exclusion from formal schooling, financial limitations, and limited public awareness. Thus, mindset interventions must be paired with broader structural reforms to create sustainable change. Additionally, the strong emotional response from parents, especially around the "Future" domain, underscores the need for mental health support alongside disability training. Some caregivers expressed feeling "seen" for the first time a powerful reminder of the psychological impact of participatory, strengths-based models.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the Fav-words framework is a powerful and adaptable tool for caregiver empowerment in Pakistan. A single, three-hour session led to significant changes in how parents viewed their child, their own caregiving role, and the future. The intervention helped shift mindsets from helplessness to advocacy and encouraged planning for education, socialization, and future independence.

The culturally relevant and easy-to-use tools made the framework accessible to families from varied backgrounds, demonstrating potential for broad scalability. Future work should examine longitudinal impacts and test digital delivery to reach underserved regions.

By reframing disability through positivity, inclusion, and empowerment, the Fav-words approach offers a hopeful path forward for disability care in both local and global contexts.

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