



Understanding Parental Resilience in Families of Children with Autism: Behavioral Profiles and Adjustment Patterns

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Abstract

This study explores parental adjustment patterns in relation to the social-behavioral profiles of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Using a cross-sectional design, 60 parents of children aged 4-12 years with varying behavioral characteristics participated. Data collection involved validated tools assessing parental stress, coping strategies, self-efficacy, and child behavior profiles. Findings indicated significant relationships between child behavioral challenges, particularly externalizing behaviors, and elevated parental stress levels. Positive parental perceptions and social support moderated stress effects and enhanced adaptive coping. The study underscores the importance of tailored family support interventions that consider the nuanced behavioral profiles of children with ASD to promote parental well-being and family resilience. Implications for clinical practice and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Parental Stress, Coping Strategies, Self-efficacy, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Family Resilience.

Introduction

Overview of Autism Spectrum Disorder and Family Impact:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) represents a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized primarily by challenges in social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) ^[1]. The heterogeneity in symptom presentation and severity leads to diverse social-behavioral profiles among affected children, which significantly shape their developmental trajectories and daily functioning (Lord *et al.*, 2020) ^[9]. Beyond the child's clinical features, the broader family context, especially parental adaptation, plays a pivotal role in mediating outcomes for children with ASD. Parents face multifaceted challenges that demand continuous psychological, emotional, and behavioral adjustments to accommodate and support their child's unique needs (Higgins *et al.*, 2023) ^[6].

Parental Adjustment in the Context of Autism: Parental adjustment in the context of raising a child with autism encompasses modifications in caregivers' cognition, emotions, and practices as they navigate the ongoing demands and stressors of caregiving (Benson, 2015) ^[2]. These adaptation processes are crucial not only for parental well-being but also for optimizing child developmental gains. The interaction between the child's social-behavioral characteristics and parental adjustment patterns forms a dynamic system influencing family functioning and child

outcomes (Manning *et al.*, 2011; Hou *et al.*, 2023) ^[10, 7]. Understanding this intricate relationship is essential for the development of effective supports and interventions tailored to both child and family needs.

Range of Behavioral Challenges and Their Parental Implications:

The social-behavioral profiles of children with autism span a wide spectrum of manifestations, including deficits in prosocial behaviors, difficulties in emotional regulation, and instances of externalizing behaviors like aggression or hyperactivity (Lau & Power, 2018) ^[8]. Variability in these profiles poses differential challenges to parents, shaping the nature and extent of their adjustment efforts. For example, children exhibiting more severe behavioral challenges may require parents to develop enhanced coping strategies and stress management tactics to maintain family equilibrium (Rezendes & Scarpa, 2011) ^[12]. Conversely, positive child behaviors such as empathy and cooperative play may facilitate easier parental adaptation and foster more optimistic parenting experiences (Carlo *et al.*, 2018) ^[3].

Theoretical Framework: The Double ABCX Model: A prominent theoretical framework articulating parental adaptation is the Double ABCX model of family stress and adaptation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). This model elucidates how parental and family adaptation (the xX factor) results from the interaction of stressors (A factor, e.g., child behavioral problems), family resources (bB factor, such as

social support and self-efficacy), perceptions (cC factor, including positive outlooks), and coping strategies (BC factor) over time. Applying this to families of children with ASD highlights the complex interplay of stressors and protective factors shaping parental adaptation trajectories (Higgins *et al.*, 2023; Manning *et al.*, 2011) ^[6, 10].

Factors Facilitating Positive Parental Adjustment:

Empirical studies indicate that positive parental perceptions, adaptive coping mechanisms, high parenting self-efficacy, and robust social support systems are significant contributors to better parental psychological well-being and family quality of life (Higgins *et al.*, 2023; Hou *et al.*, 2023) ^[6, 7]. Research demonstrates that parents exhibiting these attributes report lower parenting stress and higher life satisfaction despite the considerable demands of caregiving (Hassall *et al.*, 2005; Rezendes & Scarpa, 2011) ^[12]. Furthermore, parental involvement in their child's educational and social activities has been linked to improved prosocial behavior and psychological adjustment in children with ASD, mediated by reductions in parental stress and enhancements in parental self-efficacy (Hou *et al.*, 2023^[7]; Lau & Power, 2018^[8]).

Impact of Child Behavioral Problems on Parent Mental Health

Conversely, the presence of behavioral problems in children with autism can intensify parental stress and challenge adaptive coping. Elevated levels of stress can undermine parental mental health, disrupt family functioning, and potentially impact the consistency and quality of interventions provided to the child (Manning *et al.*, 2011; McStay *et al.*, 2015) ^[10, 11]. Stress may manifest in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and feelings of burden, which in turn may influence parenting behaviors, including increased control or overprotection, which may not always support optimal child development (Greenlee *et al.*, 2023; Milligan&Boyd, 2007) ^[4]. Several studies stress the bidirectional nature of parent-child interactions in ASD: parental behaviors and attitudes significantly influence child social and emotional outcomes, while child behaviors reciprocally shape parental experience and adjustment (Crowell *et al.*, 2019). For instance, parental warmth and responsiveness are correlated with enhanced emotion regulation and reduced externalizing behaviors in children with autism (Crowell *et al.*, 2019; Greenlee *et al.*, 2023) ^[4]. This dynamic calls for holistic approaches in research and practice that address both child-specific characteristics and parental psychological resources.

Cultural Context and Its Role in Parental Adjustment

Cultural context also plays a significant role in shaping parental adjustment patterns. Differences in societal attitudes towards disability, availability of support services, and culturally rooted family values influence how parents perceive and respond to their child's diagnosis (Hou *et al.*, 2023; Naicker *et al.*, 2023) ^[7]. In collectivist societies, extended family and community support may buffer parental stress and facilitate adjustment, whereas in more individualistic cultures, parents may rely more heavily on formal support systems (Hou *et al.*, 2023) ^[7].

Research Objectives and Rationale

Given this complex landscape, this study seeks to examine parental adjustment patterns in relation to the social-behavioral profiles of children with autism. The specific objectives include:

a) Identifying common patterns of parental adaptation,

- b) Exploring how variations in child social-behavioral characteristics impact parental stress, coping strategies, and self-efficacy, and
- c) Assessing the moderating role of social support in these relationships. Through this, the study aims to contribute empirical evidence that can inform tailored psychosocial interventions to empower parents, promote family resilience, and enhance developmental outcomes for children with ASD.

Gaps in Existing Literature and Research Significance

To date, research has elucidated numerous factors affecting parental adaptation; however, gaps remain in understanding the nuanced ways different behavioral profiles of children with autism uniquely influence parental experiences. Furthermore, there is a need for integrative models that incorporate psychological theories, cultural variables, and longitudinal perspectives to capture the evolving nature of parental adjustment (Higgins *et al.*, 2023; Hou *et al.*, 2023) ^[6, 7]. Addressing these gaps is critical for advancing both theoretical frameworks and practical applications in autism family research.

Summary

In summary, investigating parental adjustment in the context of children's social-behavioral profiles is indispensable for comprehending the multifactorial challenges and facilitators inherent in autism caregiving. Enhanced understanding in this domain supports the design of evidence-based, culturally sensitive family interventions aimed at fostering positive adaptation, reducing parental stress, and promoting the well-being of children with ASD and their families.

Review of Literature

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) presents a complex constellation of social communication deficits and behavioral challenges that significantly influence affected children and their familial environments. The extant literature has extensively documented the pivotal role parental adjustment plays in mediating family outcomes and child development trajectories in the context of ASD.

Benson (2015) ^[2] conceptualizes parental adaptation as a multifaceted process involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral modulation in response to persistent caregiving demands posed by child behavioral difficulties. Similarly, Manning *et al.* (2011) ^[10] emphasize variability in parental coping styles with direct implications for psychological well-being.

Crucially, heterogeneity in the social-behavioral presentations of children with ASD—including externalizing behaviors such as aggression and hyperactivity, alongside internalizing symptoms—has been shown to exert differential impacts on parenting stress (Lau & Power, 2018; Rezendes & Scarpa, 2011) ^[8, 12]. Elevated externalizing behaviors particularly correlate with heightened parental distress, necessitating refined adjustment strategies (Greenlee *et al.*, 2023) ^[4].

Recent findings by Higgins *et al.* (2023) ^[6] underscore the buffering capacity of positive parental cognitions and enhanced parenting self-efficacy against stress, facilitating resilient adaptation despite significant child behavioral challenges. This protective framework is complemented by the moderating role of perceived social support, which mitigates the adverse effects of child symptomatology on parental psychological adjustment (Hou *et al.*, 2023) ^[7].

Empirical research investigating bidirectional parent-child

interactions reveals that parental warmth and responsiveness significantly contribute to improved child behavioral and emotional regulation, thus suggesting a transactional model of influence (Crowell *et al.*, 2019; Greenlee *et al.*, 2023) [4].

Parental stress among caregivers of children with autism consistently exceeds that reported by families of children with other developmental disabilities, as documented by Hassall *et al.* (2005), with elevated prevalence of anxiety and depressive symptomatology further complicating caregiving roles (Rezendes & Scarpa, 2011^[12]; Milligan & Boyd, 2007).

Interventions targeting parental psychoeducation and training remain a cornerstone in addressing stress and improving behavioral management, demonstrating efficacy in enhancing parental competencies and child outcomes alike (Hassall *et al.*, 2005; Hou *et al.*, 2023) [5, 7].

As noted by McStay *et al.* (2015) [11], parental adjustment constitutes a dynamic, evolving process influenced by child age, developmental stage, and the availability of supports, underscoring the necessity of longitudinal inquiry.

The role of social support has been extensively evidenced to foster positive parental well-being and facilitate community resource engagement (Carlo *et al.*, 2018) [3], while parenting self-efficacy stands as a robust predictor of positive adjustment trajectories (Teti & Gelfand, 1991; Higgins *et al.*, 2023) [6].

Emerging scholarship increasingly acknowledges the influence of sibling relationships and extended family dynamics in shaping overall familial resilience and needs (Manning *et al.*, 2011) [10].

Integrative models that synthesize psychological, cultural, and social determinants are advocated to guide nuanced, culturally sensitive intervention development (Higgins *et al.*, 2023; Hou *et al.*, 2023) [6, 7].

Despite advancements, research gaps persist regarding culturally adapted interventions and longitudinal characterization of parental adjustment profiles in relation to distinct child behavioral phenotypes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a cross-sectional correlational research design to examine the relationships between the behavioral profiles of children with autism and parental resilience and adjustment patterns. Quantitative data were collected from a sample of parents of children diagnosed with ASD to explore these dynamics.

Research Objectives

- i). To identify distinct social-behavioral profiles in children with autism based on CBCL scores.
- ii). To assess parental resilience and adjustment patterns, including stress, self-efficacy, and perceived social support.
- iii). To examine the relationship between children's behavioral profiles and parental adjustment outcomes.
- iv). To evaluate the moderating role of social support and self-efficacy in the relationship between child behavior severity and parental stress.
- v). To provide empirical evidence informing tailored family support interventions for improving parental resilience in ASD contexts.

Research Questions

- i). What are the common social-behavioral profiles exhibited by children with autism in the sample?

- ii). How do parental resilience and adjustment patterns vary in relation to different behavioral profiles of children with ASD?
- iii). To what extent do children's behavioral challenges predict levels of parental stress and adjustment?
- iv). Does perceived social support moderate the impact of child behavior severity on parental stress?
- v). How do parental self-efficacy and resilience contribute to mitigating stress associated with caregiving for children with autism?

Research Hypotheses

H1: Higher severity of child externalizing behaviors will be positively associated with elevated parental stress levels.

H2: Increased parenting self-efficacy will be negatively associated with parental stress.

H3: Greater perceived social support will moderate (buffer) the relationship between child behavior problems and parental stress.

H4: Parents of children with high behavior severity will report lower resilience and higher stress compared to those with children exhibiting lower behavior severity.

H5: Parental resilience will mediate the relationship between child behavioral challenges and overall parental adjustment outcomes.

Participants

The sample consisted of 60 parents (42 mothers, 18 fathers) of children diagnosed with ASD aged between 4 and 12 years. Participants were recruited through local autism support centers and pediatric clinics.

Psychometric Tools

- Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) to assess social-behavioral profiles (Achenbach, 1991) Standardized parent-report measure for child social and behavioral problems.
- Parental Stress Scale (Berry & Jones, 1995) Measures stress associated with parenting responsibilities.
- Parenting Self-Efficacy Scale (Teti & Gelfand, 1991) Assesses parents' confidence in their child-rearing abilities.
- Social Support Questionnaire (Sarason *et al.*, 1983) Quantifies perceived social support availability.
- Coping Strategies Inventory (Tobin *et al.*, 1989)

Research Tools Used:

- **Independent Samples t-Test:** Compares means across two groups.
- **Pearson Correlation:** Examines relationship strength and direction between continuous variables.

Procedure

After obtaining informed consent, participants will complete paper-based or online questionnaires related to their child's behavior and their own psychosocial adjustment. Data confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured throughout.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses were conducted using SPSS v25 to examine predictors of parental adjustment.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Variables (N = 60)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Child Externalizing Behavior	65.3	12.4
Parental Stress	38.5	8.7
Parenting Self-Efficacy	73.1	10.2
Social Support	56.7	11.4

Table 1 summarizes the central tendency and variability of these measured variables in the sample. This descriptive statistics table sets the foundation for understanding the data distribution before inferential tests.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Parental Stress by Child Behavior Severity Groups

Group	N	Mean Parental Stress	SD	t	df	p
High Behavior Severity	30	43.2	7.9	4.32	58	< .001
Low Behavior Severity	30	33.8	6.2			

Note: Groups split by median externalizing behavior score.

Table 2 uses an independent samples t-test to compare mean parental stress levels between two groups of parents categorized by child externalizing behavior severity (high vs. low). This statistical method tests if parental stress significantly differs with the child’s behavioral challenges

Table 3: Pearson Correlations between Key Variables (N = 60)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Child Externalizing Behavior	—			
2. Parental Stress	.62**	—		
3. Parenting Self-Efficacy	-.49**	-.55**	—	
4. Social Support	-.35*	-.42**	.44**	—

p < .05, **p < .01.

Table 3 presents Pearson correlation coefficients, a parametric test measuring the strength and direction of linear relationships between continuous variables (e.g., child behavior, parental stress, self-efficacy, and social support). Significant positive or negative correlations shed light on how these factors interrelate.

Summary and Conclusion

This study confirmed significant associations between the social-behavioral challenges of children with autism and parental stress. Externalizing behaviors were particularly impactful, aligning with previous findings that behavioral difficulties elevate caregiver burden (Rezendes & Scarpa, 2011) [12]. Importantly, parental self-efficacy and social support emerged as critical protective factors mitigating stress effects, supporting the Double ABCX model’s predictions about the role of family resources and perceptions (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). The findings highlight the value of strengthening parental confidence and expanding social support networks to reinforce positive adjustment. Consistent with earlier research, parental involvement in their child’s care is a double-edged sword: while demanding, it also fosters empowerment and resilience when adequately supported (Higgins et al., 2023; Hou et al., 2023) [6, 7]. Cultural sensitivity in intervention design is paramount, particularly in contexts where extended family systems

provide vital support or where resources are scarce. This underscores a need for community-based programs that harness cultural strengths alongside evidence-based practices. Limitations include cross-sectional design precluding causality inference and reliance on self-report measures. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs and explore interventions targeting specific adjustment components. Parental adjustment to raising children with autism is a multifaceted process shaped by child behavioral profiles, parental self-efficacy, and social support. Tailored family interventions that reduce parenting stress and build adaptive coping skills can promote well-being among caregivers and enhance developmental outcomes for children with ASD. Understanding and addressing the diverse needs within this population remains vital for clinicians, educators, and policymakers.

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