

The Relationship Between Childhood Autism Condition and Mental Health of Parents of Children with Autism

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Abstract. This research study posed one specific question: does childhood autism as a condition directly hurt the mental well-being of parents whose children have autism? To answer the question, the researcher performed a content analysis of existing literature on the subject. The general answer the researcher found is that, indeed, the condition of childhood autism impairs parents' mental health. This study established that, in most cases, a child with autism's primary caregiver is their father or mother. This study using content analysis of existing research, confirms that caring for an autistic child contributes to poorer mental health among parents. Even though this study finds no variation in the extent of mental health impacts on fathers and mothers, mothers are more susceptible to mental health deterioration. Therefore, it makes sense to investigate the impacts of childhood autism condition on the psychological wellbeing of parents with autistic children.

Keywords: Childhood Autism; Parents; Mental Health.

1. Introduction

The primary caregiver of a child with autism is their parent [1]. Therefore, giving the children special attention is their responsibility. The current research will investigate how childhood autism impacts the mental well-being of the parents of a child with autism. Specifically, this study will answer the research question: does childhood autism as a condition directly hurt the psychological state of parents of children with autism? This research assumes that raising a child with autism burdens parents mentally. However, the mystery is whether this influence is direct or indirect through external factors. Indeed, a plethora of scientific research exists on this topic.

Different researchers focus on distinct themes regarding the parents' mental health as primary caregivers of children with autism. A search on Google Scholar using the syntax ("parent" and "mental health" and "child* autism" pdf DOI) returns countlessly accessible, peer-reviewed research papers on the same. Several observations from existing research form the foundation of the current study. For instance, found that mothers are the primary caregivers, dedicating up to five hours daily to give a child with autism special attention [2]. Likewise, even non-biological parents experience stress and anxiety when looking after their child who has autism [3]. According to [1], taking care of a child with autism can sometimes get so demanding that parents develop depression and suicidal ideation.

Society sometimes labels families with a child with autism as a family with a problem [4]. In other words, all these research findings converge at a point that parents with autistic children lead a different kind of life, facing unique challenges, compared with parents with healthy children. To illustrate further, found that parents lose so much time locating ideal professional help for their child who has autism, and this long, tedious process sometimes frustrates them [5].

Existing research suggests that bringing up a child with autism can hurt a parent's mental health. For instance, all the studies mentioned above indicate that parents of children with autism develop anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and withdrawal, among others. However, there is still room for adding knowledge to this expanding body of literature. For instance, the mental well-being of non-biological parents raising a child with autism remains under-researched [3]. Additionally, most of the studies consulted so far to prepare for the current research have a limitation: they do not meticulously prove whether the mental health challenges are direct outcomes of the parent's knowledge of their

child's condition or other effects it causes. It is paramount to know what exactly causes the observed mental health challenges to solve them.

The current research will use content analysis of existing research. The present study will also investigate policymaking regarding looking after children with autism. In other words, this research will seek policy solutions that can lighten the burden of responsibility for parents with children with autism. Indeed, indicated that early diagnosis of childhood autism might help parents lead healthier lives when raising their children [6]. In other words, they would know more about the condition and how to look after the child. This way, not only would they learn early but also develop a resilient and optimistic psychological mindset. Therefore, the current study will also investigate existing policies and whether a tried-and-tested framework exists to help parents with children with autism maintain good mental health. The findings from the present study will contribute to the global library of information about the mental health of parents with autistic children.

Childhood autism as a condition leaves diverse mental health impacts on parents. This paper begins with investigating the whole picture of the situation for most of these parents, as represented in published peer-reviewed journal articles. Next, the research uncovers the impacts of childhood autism on the parent's mental health according to data from published studies. This paper then puts forth recommendations based on the identified effects. The concluding section of this paper presents measures that can determine whether implementing the recommendations works.

2. Current Status

This section examines the status of parenting children with autism and its effects on parents' mental health. This part draws from the most recent journal articles on the subject. Recent studies like [5] show that autism is slowly becoming a problem for most countries worldwide. Specifically, the researchers stated that autism had increased worldwide by one percent. To make matters worse, [5] observed that despite the possible autism diagnosis at just 24 months, most parents learn about the condition when their children start school. Therefore, late diagnosis remains a frustrating problem for parents of childhood autism. The United States and the United Kingdom offer excellent prevalence examples. Studies like [7] indicate that at least one child among a sample of 44 will have autism in the United States by the time they become eight years old. In the United Kingdom, a longitudinal study found that at least seven in ten parents who participated in the study said they had one autistic child in their family [8]. Therefore, a worrying number of children have autism across the US and Europe.

Accordingly, it is crucial to study parenting children with autism since it differs from everyday parenting [1]. A current study shows that autistic children's parents require a healthy mental state to manage an aggressive child with autism [4]. In other words, effective parenting of a child with autism requires a parent that can respond to their aggression soberly and compassionately. Indeed, noted that every parent with a sick child would develop emotional or psychological difficulty [4]. In other words, properly raising children with autism requires parents with self-awareness and can regulate how they react to annoying things the child might do or mean society members might say.

Most parents struggle to find ideal professional help for their children with autism. A case of parents with children in Massachusetts shows that some of these parents moved to a different city because their local home did not have a suitable learning system and to interact with other parents going through the same problem [4]. In other words, even in an advanced economy like the United States, parents of children with autism leave their local residences to get the best education for their children elsewhere. It is safe to assume that most localities still lack amenities to help raise and support children with autism. Second, most parents form social groups to support one another, suggesting a feeling of isolation from the rest of society. It is the case that the rest of the community does not fully understand the dynamics of an autistic child's upbringing.

However, one cannot blame society alone because autistic children's parents are also not fully aware of the condition. For instance, observed that some parents with autistic children would

stigmatize the child, mainly because such parents have not achieved outstanding life success, lack proper education, have a higher standing in society, and have a low sense of self-worth. In other words, there is ignorance regarding autism in most societies and among parents [4]. This lack of understanding frustrates parents to the extent that they also mistreat the child with autism since they do not know the appropriate way to act.

The lack of social support from society leaves some understanding parents with no choice but to deal with the 'problem' in isolation. For example, a longitudinal study in the UK found that most parents would rather keep their children at home rather than send them to school, even when those schools have the option to assist the children [9]. This observation suggests that most parents still find raising a child with autism challenging despite existing support institutions. Perhaps, knowing that society still does not understand autism, the parents lack trust in existing institutions to take care of their children. Caring for these children can be devastating to parents who cannot afford to stay at home with the children. For example, a study examining parents in the lower social and economic classes revealed that these parents suffered more mental difficulties and did not do well in life overall [9]. This observation suggests that while most autistic children's parents experience psychological challenges, a lack of financial capability to support the children deteriorate their mental health even more. Furthermore, this observation suggests that existing amenities to help these children might be expensive.

In addition to financial distress, individual parents' characteristics can put them at a disadvantage in raising a child with autism. For instance, based on more than 300,000 participants in more than 400 studies observed that naturally outspoken parents did well in life even when they had a child with autism [6]. However, the same studies suggest hopelessness leads to psychological problems among parents raising autistic children [6]. At the same time, it is evident that parents who can and have someone to talk to about their situation are likely to maintain excellent mental health. Accordingly, the current known factors behind high stress levels among parents of autistic children have to do with the parents' inappropriate reactions to the condition.

Even so, more educated parents find it more challenging to cope with raising children with autism than their moderately educated counterparts. For instance, found that parents with stellar academic and professional achievements expected even more stellar performance from their children; accordingly, these parents understood from the beginning that their children would not amount to much in life due to the children's autistic condition [2]. Thus, the parents' pessimism and hopelessness about their child's condition, and not necessarily the behavior alone, worsen the parents' mental health difficulties, too. Another group of parents who experience more mental frustrations than the rest are single parents. According to, married parents with autistic children who lived with their spouses helped each other take care of the children [10]. In other words, frustrations and mental health difficulties are worse when parents are single-handedly taking care of the child or when they have financial challenges.

3. Impacts

The impacts of raising children with autism on the parents are many. For example, found that almost four in ten parents complained and worried most of the time [9]. Specifically, the researchers found that many parents feared that they could not stop thinking about the problem as they perceived it as endless and felt helpless for their children because they could not develop a positive mindset themselves [9]. The problem most parents raising children with autism have is the knowledge that they may never solve the issue. In other words, their pursuit of the end of autism instead of managing it frustrates them constantly.

According to, only three in ten German children whose parents they engaged knew their child was autistic within the child's first two years [5]. In other words, going by their sample, over fifty percent of German children with autism get their diagnosis much later. This late diagnosis suggests that many frustrated parents of autistic children because of the mental health difficulties associated with

managing a recently diagnosed condition. This finding further shows that mothers of autistic children may encounter learning about their child's condition differently compared to fathers.

The psychological effects of caring for a child with autism on mothers are overwhelming. Scholars like investigated these effects on mothers, making the following findings: seven in ten of the mothers felt isolated, five in ten felt guilty for waiting too long before diagnosis, seven in ten lived with trauma, and close to nine in ten always felt rejected whenever they could not get help from the professionals who often gave up on them [11]. These findings suggest that most mothers struggle emotionally to care for their children. Additionally, the hypothesis that the mother is the most involved in raising children with autism, and suffers more mental health difficulties, appears in other studies. For example, found that at least one-third of mothers and one-fifth of fathers experienced more clinical depression symptoms than their counterparts raising normal children [3].

The above statistics suggest that mothers experience more mental health challenges than fathers of children with autism. Even so, this observation is more profound than the numbers. To begin with, it suggests that a causal relationship between mothers being more involved and suffering more psychological problems appears to exist. It also suggests inadequate care from mothers alone and overwhelming responsibility on mothers alone. The numbers also imply that children with autism might not get appropriate parental care, especially in cases where the condition frustrates both the father and mother. This observation is also alarming, given that earlier found that some autistic children's parents develop a dislike for the children [4]. Therefore, parents' depression, anxiety, and frustrations due to their child's autism affect the child too.

Besides, further observed that since a child's autistic condition impacts their parents, the affected children 'absorbs' the depression or anxiety from their parents [3]. Therefore, it is likely that a parent's mental health instability when raising a child with autism further frustrates their efforts. In other words, if the child 'absorbs' mental health problems from parents, the child might become even more aggressive and combatant. Notably, observed that children with autism sometimes get aggressive with their caregivers [4]. Therefore, parents are more likely to succeed in raising these children if they are mentally alert, reduce reactionary behaviors, and handle the children more compassionately. In response to the above negative mental health impacts of raising a child with autism on parents, the following recommendations ensue.

4. Recommendations

The psychological impacts of childhood autism on parents justify the suggestion that it should be under public health. The most effective ways to address childhood autism lie in government endeavors. The following are some government-related recommendations to help address childhood autism.

4.1 Establish Support Infrastructure

The findings from that some parents prefer keeping their children with autism at home inspire the following recommendation [9]. Education institutions should establish trustworthiness to help children with autism. These subsystems in schools should comprise trained professionals to help these children. The idea is to help the children go through the school system smoothly. At the same time, the school's performance should manifest in the reformed behaviors of a child with autism so that parents trust the system. This move is profoundly helpful because it relieves parents who raise children with autism single-handedly and must still work to feed their families.

4.2 Direct Government Assistance

Another finding from that parents from low-income households suffer inspires the suggestion that governments should help parents of children with autism [9]. Government should use part of its funds to finance public schools so that they can accommodate children with autism affordable for parents. Alternatively, governments should initiate assistance programs to help autistic children's parents

educate them. Additionally, local and federal governments should establish institutions that train parents of children with autism on the best methods to raise such children. The government should also start support programs to help both financially and socially. Societies should create a culture where members do not perceive children with autism with disappointment. Instead of integrating autism in regular education, where it comes out as an auxiliary service, most states and counties should have amenities and education institutions to support families of autistic children. This way, raising a child with autism does not become too expensive or inconvenient for the parents since moving from city to city can be unaffordable.

4.3 Civic Education

According to, extroverted parents thrive when raising children with autism which inspires the following recommendation [6]. Indeed, raising a child with autism can overwhelm parents who always seek solutions. Governments should invest in advertising to encourage parents of children with autism. The message should include advice to talk to someone or join therapy. Since professional therapy sessions can be expensive for low-income parents, governments should intervene and fully sponsor or subsidize them. For instance, special education schools should offer sessions as part of the package for children with autism. Governments and educational institutions must hold civic education on managing the condition.

The idea of having childhood autism-focused civic education arises from the finding that some parents wanted a specific conclusion to the problem [9]. Accordingly, autistic children's parents should focus on the management of their children's condition rather than hope that the problem ends. They should not focus on complete healing, a long and weary journey. It requires patience and endurance while being optimistic. This suggestion is especially crucial when the diagnoses come late, and the best they can do is manage rather than 'condition' the child. A rigorous civic education can sensitize parents to become aware of autism. This education can help them get an early diagnosis in, say, 48 months, as suggests, the earliest and most ideal autism diagnosis period [5]. Below are some ways governments and institutions of learning can tell that their efforts to help parents with autistic children are practical. In addition to the above government-related initiatives, the international community can also help address the problem of autism.

4.4 Robust International Cooperation

Autism is not a problem that is specific to countries or individuals. It is an international problem with which parents must deal regardless of their countries of origin. Based on the scope of this research, autism does not receive international cooperation like other issues. Therefore, governments of different countries should form a joint task force to find working solutions. This way, all affected parents can benefit from scientific collaborations regardless of their country. Once the above recommendations reach implementation, the following measures can gauge their success.

5. Measures

5.1 Number of Diagnoses

Suggestions from indicate that the best time to get a childhood autism diagnosis is during the first 48 months [5]. After implementing civic education and establishing support institutions, authorities should research the number of diagnoses during the first two years of children who get autism diagnosis. A higher number than the average before the implementation implies that the system is working. A number equal to or below the mean value would suggest that the intervention is not working. Additional changes would follow based on these numbers to ensure implementation is effective.

5.2 Therapy Sessions for Parents

Another indicator to evaluate the extent to which implementations of the above recommendations are successful is records of therapy sessions of parents. The number of parents who attend therapy sessions after the government sponsors or subsidizes them can give an accurate picture of how well the parents cope. According to, parents (of children with autism) who talk to someone about their frustrations experience low mental health difficulties [6].

5.3 Children's Progress

A crucial factor in assessing the effectiveness of implementing the recommendations is the progress of the children with autism. Specifically, their academic and co-curricular progress can help them know if the interventions are effective. In other words, the purpose of the above suggestions is not to help parents manage their children but also to help the children actualize their dreams. If the children are less aggressive, then the interventions are working. The interventions are effective when the children develop an interest in certain creative activities and thrive. Any sign of progress and attempt to lead a productive life can help measure the child's progress and the effectiveness of the interventions.

6. Conclusion

This research study endeavored to answer the question: does childhood autism as a condition directly hurt the psychological wellbeing of autistic children's parents? The following are the significant findings from the review of studies. First, the study found that the primary source of frustration and mental health difficulties is the lack of professional help. For example, it emerged from the review that most parents struggle to find ideal professional assistance for their children with autism. An ironical finding from the research is that some parents discriminate against their children with autism. From the reviewed studies, some parents felt that their children with autism took more of their time than necessary. These frustrations, coupled with the feelings of compromised self-actualizations, contribute to parents' mental health deterioration.

In addition to parental discrimination, this study found even another drawback. Specifically, society discriminates against the child with autism and their parents. Therefore, the psychological difficulties of parents with autistic children come from feelings of isolation due to discrimination in society. The researcher found that, in some instances, the amount of mental health suffering parents got related directly to their personalities. For example, extraverted parents were more likely to share their problems with trusted friends, overcoming mental frustrations. However, introverted parents were more likely to suffer more mental health problems because of their unwillingness to share their challenges. This study found that, ironically, highly educated parents with autistic children suffer more psychological health problems. The argument from reviewed studies is that these parents know the hopeless situation of the children. They, therefore, get frustrated because they do not see the problems ending or their children achieving self-actualization. The researcher also found that society is the weakest link in the struggle to address childhood obesity. Discrimination against children with autism and their parents from the rest of society worsens the parents' mental health status. In addition to the above findings, this study also makes the following impacts.

This study reveals that the number of children with autism is higher than the media acknowledges. It exposes that society gives childhood autism little attention, even though it is a problem to take seriously. Another impact of this study is that gender inequality continues to put women at a disadvantage even in caring for children with autism. Most primary caregivers are women, and this observation implies that most victims of childhood autism-prompted mental health problems are women. This research has also revealed that there is no adequate infrastructure in education systems to help address childhood autism. Even if some schools accommodate children with autism, the support is still suboptimal. Some parents even prefer keeping their children with autism at home. As insightful as these impacts are, the struggle to help parents of children with autism can only achieve

maximum success by looking into the future. Therefore, future studies should explore working frameworks countries can adopt to deal with childhood autism as a national crisis. Presently, there are few case studies to demonstrate national efforts to address childhood autism.

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