

Unraveling Resilience: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of a Parent in Raising a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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Abstract

This qualitative design study utilized a single-case method to explore the difficulties and real-life experiences parents of autistic children encounter. It looks at the coping strategies and approaches the parent used to overcome these obstacles, demonstrating extraordinary resilience amid hardships. Using Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping theory, the study examined and assessed risks, damages, and difficulties (1984). This idea states that interactions or transactions between a person and their environment determine their capacity for coping with and adjusting to difficulties. The research participant is a 32-year-old mother of two children, the oldest of whom has autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The study recorded the mother's unique tales through in-depth interviews with her child who has autism. With the participant's informed consent, the collected data were thematically analyzed to ensure Republic Act No. 10173, generally known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012, was implemented. We sought to identify recurring themes and divergent viewpoints by documenting and assessing these experiences through interviews, contributing fresh perspectives to the corpus of existing information on the topic.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); resilience; challenges; experiences; coping mechanisms.

1. Introduction

Communication difficulties, repetitive habits, and interests are characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). A neurodevelopmental disease. As parents negotiate a world that may not always understand or accommodate their kid's specific demands, raising a child with ASD provides unique challenges and individual successes. It takes a lot of time, money, patience, understanding, and effort to raise a child with autism. Autism-related children may never learn to speak or look someone in the eye. A wide range of indications and symptoms are commonly displayed by children with autism, such as poor communication skills, difficulties keeping eye contact, repetitive activities such as banging their head, flapping, or twisting an object repeatedly, and inflexible conduct that indicates difficulty changing. Most of the time, parents must find their way around complex healthcare systems, find a school that provides a particular curriculum, and get used to daily tasks that conflict with their child's particular needs. This case study explores parents' experiences raising children with ASD in detail. In order to improve comprehension of the emotional and demanding nature of parenting a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as the practical, social, economic, educational, mental health, and mental health aspects involved, it will be helpful to look at the difficulties parents encounter when raising an autistic child and consider coping mechanisms to help them

manage the difficulties while continuing to support and monitor the child's development. As to Gialloreti et al. (2019), the estimated prevalence of ASD is such that one in every 59 eight-year-old children has this disease. According to specific theories, the current situations resulted from the interplay between heredity and environmental variables, which may have a harmful influence. With the advancement of technology, particularly in molecular biology and data analysis, medical professionals are now better equipped to diagnose conditions and address a variety of coexisting factors, providing a multitude of options to eliminate the gene-environment interaction that gives rise to autism spectrum disorder.

In the Philippines, the government was alarmed by rising cases of autism spectrum disorder and pushed a bill creating a government-funded center for Autism in 2022. The Department of Health (DOH) has reported that over the past ten years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of cases of autism spectrum disorder nationwide. Senate President Juan Miguel "Migz" Zubiri has introduced Senate Bill No.611, titled "Act Establishing a Center for Autism and for Other Purposes." By April 2018, there were one million Filipinos, up from 500,000 in 2008, according to a limited statistical technique. "As the number of people living with autism continues to rise, it is imperative that the Philippine government finally recognize the prevalence of autism and provide much-needed services to people living with it," Zubiri stated in her introduction of Senate Bill No. 611. The government provides readily available diagnostic, therapeutic, and rehabilitative treatments, along with training services for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Thus, he stressed that the center's development would undoubtedly fulfill the requirements of those with autism.

To close this knowledge gap, this study offered insights specific to the local setting, helping to shape the creation of focused treatments and supportive services. However, it is imperative to recognize this study's shortcomings, such as possible biases in the participant's responses on the subjective nature of her experiences. However, there was a pressing need to understand how the parent's view on raising a child with autism cannot be emphasized because it directly influences initiatives aimed at raising the standard of living for impacted families. Furthermore, as per Connolly et al. (2007), a parent's ability to tolerate elevated stress levels is contingent upon the effectiveness and quantity of coping strategies they employ to face the rigors of parenting a kid with ASD. According to Al-Oran et al., parents of children with ASD mainly utilize two coping strategies: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping (2022). Previous research has consistently shown this. Emotion-focused coping concentrates on managing one's emotional responses to stressors, whereas problem-focused coping seeks to address and fix the stressor's underlying cause directly. Each approach offers distinct advantages and is influenced by various individual and situational factors. Research suggests that a flexible approach that combines both mechanisms is often most effective in managing stress and promoting psychological well-being.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

This qualitative research, conducted in Calinan, Davao City, Philippines, examines the difficulties and experiences of a 32-year-old woman raising a 7-year-old kid with an autism spectrum disorder.

First, the study aimed to understand parents' experiences and unique challenges in raising an autistic child. This purpose recognized the variety and complexity of the challenges experienced by parents, from acceptance of the situation to figuring out the early intervention, finding the best healthcare system, family support, and social expectations. Second, the study intended to learn and explore parents' coping strategies to deal with these challenges efficiently and effectively. The study aimed to shed light on the effectiveness of these coping mechanisms by identifying and studying them and testifying to the resilience of parents in reducing the stress and pressures of having a child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Lastly, this single case study set an objective to raise awareness and provide additional knowledge and insights straight from parents who have firsthand experiences with raising a child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

1.2 Research Questions

The study aims to answer the following question.

1. What are the challenges the parent faces in raising a child with autism?
2. How do parents cope in addressing these challenges?
3. What insights or advice can the parent give to other parents having the same conditions of raising a child with autism?

1.3 Related Literature and Studies

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disease resulting from differences in the brain. Even though the condition is commonly identified in the first two years of life, it is categorized as a "developmental disorder" and can affect people of any age. A hereditary issue, for example, is a trait that sets certain persons with ASD diagnoses apart. According to research, a variety of variables that interact to change people's normal developmental pathways are what lead to ASD. The determination of whether an individual has ASD is done through observations, medical histories, and a variety of diagnostic tests and assessment tools in clinics. A diagnosed child with ASD requires access to an array of health and educational services and supports, and because of this, parents need to report their perceptions of their children's health condition (Audas et al., 2022).

Lived Experiences and Challenges of Parenting a Child with Autism

Studies have also shown the tremendous challenges that autistic individuals and their families endure, as well as the impact autism has on parents' mental health. As per Acharya and Sharma (2021), these challenges

encompass psychological distress, ongoing financial strain due to expensive therapies and treatments, considerable strain on family relationships, modifications in the roles, structures, and activities of the family, and feelings of guilt and blame concerning the diagnosis and social stigma. Tension, worry, sadness (Hayes & Watson, 2013), and emotions of loss, guilt, and loneliness (Gray, 2002) are emotional and psychological obstacles that parents must deal with. The cost associated with therapy, medical care, and specialized education is another challenge and impacts parental employment and income. Aside from all these challenges, social challenges are on the list as the family relationship is strained, and some social isolation arises (Wainer & Ingersoll, 2013), leading to some stigma and discrimination (Gray, 2002). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) presents all these unique challenges for families and parents.

Coping Mechanisms of Parenting a Child with Autism

Coping mechanisms encompass individuals' diverse cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies to manage stress, adversity, and challenging circumstances. These mechanisms served as adaptive responses to reduce the negative impact of stressors and facilitate psychological adjustment. This can vary widely based on individual differences, environmental factors, and the specific nature of the stressor at hand. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) suggest that parents should actively seek resources, guidance, or help from others to address the issue and resolve the source of stress (Thoits, 1986). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two categories of coping methods: emotion-focused and problem-focused. Problem-focused coping involves direct efforts to address and manage the stressor itself. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), time management is a way to cope, organize tasks, and allocate time effectively to manage stressors more efficiently. Emotion-focused coping entails regulating emotional responses to the stressor rather than directly addressing the problem. This approach aims to manage distress and enhance emotional well-being. Seeking empathy, understanding, and comfort from others to alleviate emotional distress (Thoits, 1986) is the best way to get emotional support. As Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) emphasize positive reinterpretation, reframing the stressful situation's meaning can be done more positively to reduce emotional distress and to engage in activities or behaviors to divert attention away from the stressor and reduce emotional arousal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In general, coping skills are essential for assisting people in maintaining their psychological balance and successfully navigating life's unavoidable obstacles. People may improve their capacity to handle stress, cultivate resilience, and advance general well-being by recognizing and applying adaptive coping methods.

1.4 Theoretical Lens

This study was supported by the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

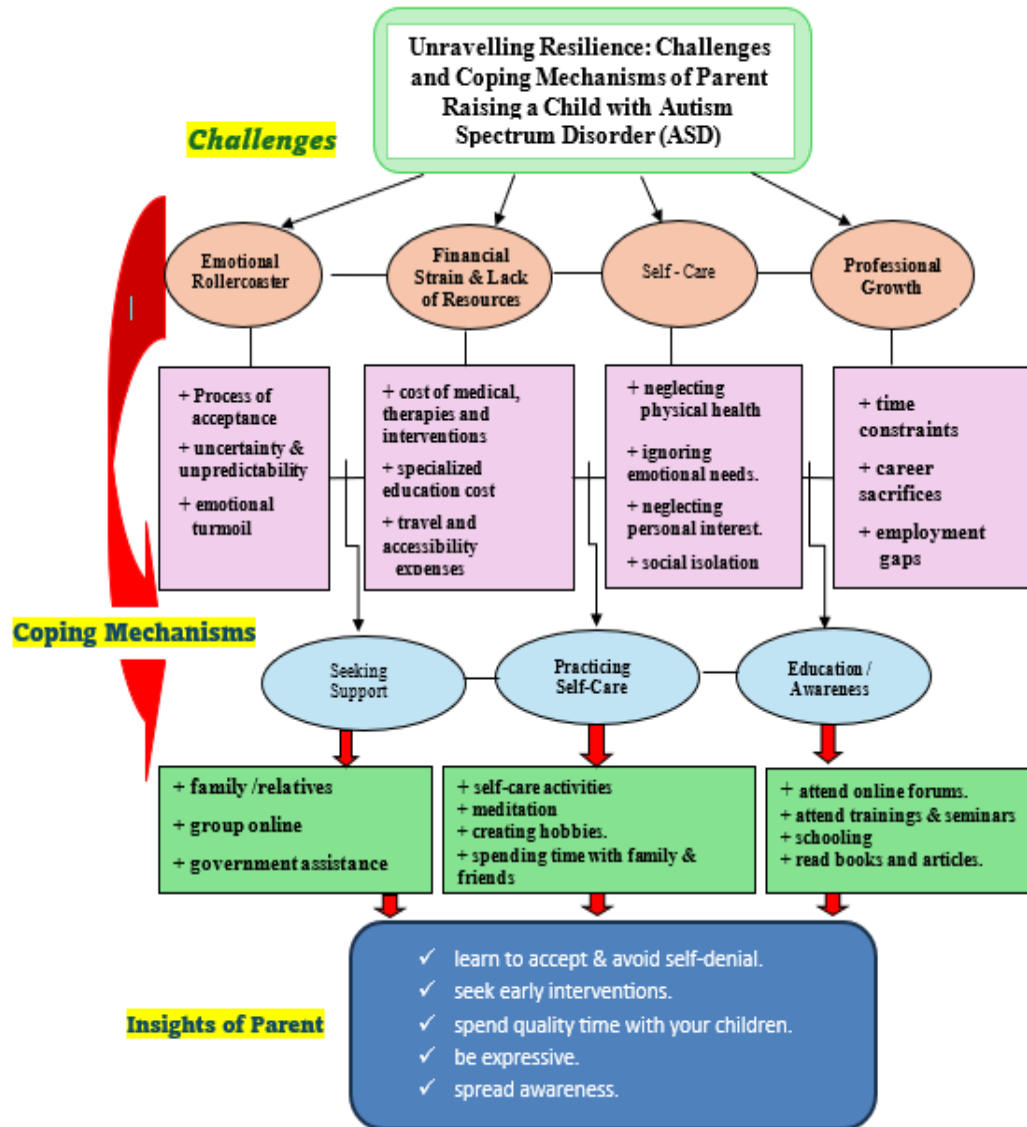


Fig 1. Unraveling Resilience: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Parent Raising a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The seven areas presented in Unraveling Resilience: Challenges and Parenting Strategies for Managing a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder are Emotional Rollercoaster, Financial Strain and Lack of Resources, Professional Growth, Self-Care, Practicing Self-Care, and Education/Awareness.

The application of Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman's (1984) Transactional model of stress and coping theory offers a thorough theoretical framework for comprehending how people perceive and react to difficulties like emotional rollercoasters, financial strain, neglect of self-care, and the slim opportunities for career advancement. The fundamental idea of this paradigm is assessment, which is people's assessment of the importance of a stressor and their coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The paradigm states that stress arises from a person's interactions with their surroundings, where stressors are seen as difficulties or dangers that test their capacity for adaptation. These assessments served as the basis for evaluating coping strategies that involved cognitive and behavioral attempts to control or decrease the stressor and its consequences, such as asking for help, engaging in self-care, educating others, and raising awareness. A few factors, such as the kind of stressor, individual variations in coping styles, and the availability of social support, impacted the efficiency of coping techniques. Furthermore, this transactional model recognizes that coping is a dynamic and iterative process, with individuals continuously assessing and adapting their coping efforts based on feedback and new information. The transactional model offers a thorough framework for comprehending the intricate interactions between people and their surroundings as they encounter and cope with stress.

To summarize, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984) was employed to emphasize the interdependence of several elements in molding the experiences of parents who raise autistic children. This study is relevant to the present times to provide additional knowledge and information that the child's growth occurs inside a complex web of cultural, social, and economic ecology that affects the family and child. To embrace acceptance, seek early interventions, nurture relationships, seek support, and advocate awareness for societal change are the insights the parent-participant gives to parents having a child with autism. By promoting awareness and understanding, parents can advocate for systematic changes that create inclusive environments for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study used a single case study technique, a powerful way to examine complicated phenomena in real-world contexts. It also used a qualitative research design. This methodology allowed us to investigate a single case deeply, providing rich insights into the participant's lived experiences, perspectives, and behaviors. We employed techniques such as in-depth face-to-face interviews, keen observations, careful recording of data, and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2020), yielding a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This single case study was precious for examining rare or unique occurrences, enabling researchers to develop hypotheses, theories, and frameworks contributing to a broader understanding of the subject matter. In this study, the researchers gather comprehensive data by applying a single case study design

that significantly enriches comprehension of complex phenomena, advancing knowledge across various fields (Yin, 2014).

2.2 Research Participant

The participant was a 32-year-old mother of a 7-year-old child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) within the third district of Davao City, Philippines. The researcher gathered data and information through observations and in-depth face-to-face interviews using an interview guide that seeks to know the experiences in navigating the challenges and struggles encountered by the parent and be able to learn the coping mechanisms as she faced these challenges and struggles.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis is vital across diverse domains, supporting evidence-based decision-making, innovation, and strategic planning. Through rigorous examination of data sets, organizations gathered invaluable insights into market trends, consumer behavior, and operational efficiency.

Reflexive thematic analysis will be used to examine the data and the procedures Braun and Clarke (2020) specify will be followed: becoming acquainted with the data, coming up with codes, creating themes, going over possible themes, defining, and labeling themes, and creating a report. All the comments about the difficulties and experiences of parenting a kid with autism spectrum disorder were coded. The research team will categorize these codes into topics they have discussed and reviewed to enhance and improve. Reflexive analysis and continuous comparison were employed to ensure that the results were accurate and reliable and provide conclusions that could be trusted.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Before conducting this study, we carefully chose a participant, a mother raising a child with autism. We prepared an informed consent form to ensure that she was well-informed about the case study we would conduct. To share knowledge derived from her experiences as a mother of an autistic kid, and she acknowledged that her involvement is entirely voluntary. We reassured her that the information collected, including her personality, would be kept private and would not be harmful to them. Following a reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020), the gathered information was altered by Republic Act No. 10173, sometimes referred to as the Act Protecting Data of 2012.

3. Results

Based on observation and in-depth interviews that were conducted, the parent emphasized four challenges that she encountered in raising a child with autism. These challenges are the following: first, (1) emotional rollercoaster, in which the parent experiences mixed feelings and emotions upon learning that the

child has an autism spectrum disorder – a feeling of uncertainty, unpredictability, and turmoil that affects various aspects of life such as mental health, relationships, and productivity. Second, the parent faces (2) financial strain and lack of resources to sustain health and medical costs, therapy, interventions, specialized education, travel, and accessibility as the child needs special care and accommodations. Navigating insurance coverage and accessing resources is a significant financial burden on families that can add to the stress and strain on parents. The third challenge that the parent experienced was a (3) lack of self-care. Balancing the needs of the child with autism with the parent's self-care can be another challenge for parents. Finding time to rest, relax, and do recreational activities that bring joy and fulfilment may be difficult amidst the demands of caregiving and advocating for the child. This burden arises due to the child's difficulties in expressing himself and the inability to recognize the danger or harm surrounding him. Lastly, the parent was challenged for the limited time for (4) professional growth. Parents raising a child with autism face significant challenges that can impact their ability to pursue professional growth and career advancement. Caring for a child with autism is time-consuming and expensive, which may cause the parent to sacrifice her career. Parents may need to take time off work or reduce their hours to accommodate their child's needs, resulting in employment gaps or interruptions in their career trajectory.

Due to these challenges, the parents employ three coping mechanisms to adjust.

First, asking for help from friends, relatives, or support organizations made up of other parents of autistic children is one of the coping mechanisms. The mom connects with others at work to get support; she discusses her experiences with a few coworkers who can relate to her challenges and offer emotional support, helpful guidance, and a sense of belonging. The parents participate in free online forums, trainings, and seminars offered by the government Department of Education about inclusive education for students with disabilities.

Secondly, practicing self-care for the parent, mental health, and well-being are essential and one of the aspects of life that should be taken care of. To cope with the challenges, the parent sets a time for herself and does some self-care activities like exercise, meditation, creating hobbies that would divert her stress from the situation, and spending time to enjoy with friends and loved ones. According to the mother of the child with autism, it is essential to remember that they are not alone in facing this kind of adversity. Sometimes, she celebrates her child's small victories and milestones, which can help maintain perspective and resilience in times of hardship.

Lastly, education and awareness. She also equipped herself with knowledge by enrolling in a master's degree class majoring in Special Education to understand more and learn strategies for dealing with children with learning disabilities like autism spectrum disorder (ASD). For her, learning new things as a parent and trying to educate people around her is also a way to cope. Reading books and articles related to her child's case can help ease the stress brought on by the situation.

INSIGHTS OF PARENT RAISING A CHILD WITH AUTISM

As a mother of an autistic child, she stresses the following advice to other parents having a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): (a) learn to accept if there are symptoms or manifestations observed and avoid self-denial; (b) seek early interventions to prevent problems occurring, or to address them ahead before problems get worse; (c) spend quality time with your children to know them better and let them feel loved; (d) be expressive to gain support and understanding; and (e) spread awareness to create inclusive, supportive, and understanding society where individuals with autism can thrive and reach their full potential.

Discussions

Much research on the difficulties and coping strategies faced by parents of autistic children has been carried out. However, it is essential to remember that every family experience is unique, and these challenges can vary greatly depending on individual circumstances. It is also crucial to note that numerous resources and support systems are available to assist families in navigating these challenges and coping mechanisms. These challenges can be categorized into several aspects, such as developmental, social, educational, emotional, and mental challenges of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Autism-related symptoms in children might include sensory sensitivity, repetitive behaviors, communication problems, and difficulty transitioning. In addition to causing stress and anxiety, these problems may also negatively affect parents' capacity for effective coping. In comparison to parents of usually developing children, parents of autistic children report higher levels of stress, primarily because of the ongoing demands and uncertainty surrounding their child's condition (Hayes & Watson, 2013). Finding the ideal learning environment for their children is a challenge that many parents face. This may entail ensuring that their child's requirements are satisfied and that they have chances for socialization and education. The costs associated with therapy, educational resources, and other forms of support can be significant. This financial burden can add to the stress experienced by parents. Parents may face difficulties in social situations, as others may not fully understand or accept the behaviors of a child with autism. A sense of exclusion or loneliness may result from this. Mentally and emotionally exhausting tasks are part of raising a kid with autism. Anxiety, sadness, and tension are common emotions among parents. According to Aaghari Nekah et al. (2011), the unique requirements and circumstances of autistic children impact both the kid and family members involved in their development. Numerous stressful and difficult circumstances affect families with children diagnosed with ASD, including unanticipated disabilities, harmful behaviors, and behavioral disorders displayed by the children, trouble accessing resources, difficulties locating appropriate treatment, and, lastly, limited, and boring social interactions (Johnson & Hastings, 2002). According to Dabrowska and Pisula (2010), mothers of children with ASD reportedly utilize emotion-focused coping techniques, including financial and social assistance as well as spiritual practices. Contrarily, Lai et al. and Hastings et al. (2015) found that fathers' use of emotion-focused coping was more likely to repress frustrations and avoid family difficulties.

Coping with these challenges of raising a child with autism requires resilience, patience, and a multifaceted approach. Parents may employ various coping mechanisms to navigate the complexity of their child's condition while maintaining their well-being. One common coping strategy is seeking out information and support networks. According to Simpson (2014), to educate themselves about ASD and discover practical methods for handling their child's symptoms, parents should research reliable resources such as books, websites, or associations for professionals who specialize in the condition. Connections with other parents of autistic children through support groups or online forums may offer priceless emotional support, affirmation, and valuable information, according to Hayes and Watson (2013). Parental stress can be reduced, and burnout can be avoided by engaging in regular exercise, mindfulness or relaxation practices, and hobbies or fulfilling pursuits (Kuhlthau et al., 2017). In addition, receiving professional assistance in the form of therapy or counseling can offer parents a secure environment in which to share their emotions, acquire coping mechanisms, and strengthen their ability to overcome the difficulties involved in raising an autistic child (Brookman-Frazee et al., 2012). Celebrating the child's accomplishments, no matter how small, can foster a positive outlook and reinforce resilience in adversity (Eisenhower et al., 2020). Establishing predictable routines and visual schedules can help reduce anxiety and promote a sense of security for both the parents and the autistic child (Smith et al., 2018).

Conclusions

The present study concludes by examining the typical difficulties faced by parents of children with autism and the coping strategies employed in these circumstances. These parent challenges emerge as the child grows and shows atypical development, specifically in communication and social skills. When the time comes for the parent to recognize the disability of the child, the unique story and experience begins. Parents encounter an emotional rollercoaster as they learn to accept and adjust to the situation. Financial strain and lack of resources due to the high cost of medical healthcare, therapy treatment and interventions, specialized education, travel, accessibility, and accommodation expenses. Self-care for parents is at stake as they must set aside their personal, emotional, and social needs to give priority to the needs of their autistic child. By seeking information and support, prioritizing self-care, and fostering a supportive family environment, parents can effectively navigate the complexities of autism and provide their child with the necessary love, understanding, and support to thrive. These coping mechanisms are crucial for mitigating stress, preventing burnout, and promoting resilience in both parents and children affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD). As demonstrated by research studies (Haydes & Watson, 2013; Kuhlthau et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018), these coping mechanisms are vital in enhancing the overall well-being and quality of life for families impacted by autism.

Implications

The challenges of raising a kid with autism are often too much to bear. One of the most significant issues was navigating the intricate and sometimes unpredictable behaviors associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). These behaviors can make daily duties and routines more difficult for the child and the parent. They range from social contact and communication difficulties to sensory sensitivity and repetitive habits.

Based on the researchers' theoretical framework and participant responses, shown in the results part of the study, discussion, and conclusion, this scope of knowledge can be used and developed for further research. The research findings can be used to widen the horizon of knowledge from the lived experiences of parents with autistic children, the challenges, and coping mechanisms to lived experiences of parents involving daily routines, social interactions, and developmental improvements involving therapy and interventions. To share information and practical intervention tactics that might assist other parents in meeting the unique requirements of their children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), this research study suggested that all parents with similar experiences organize conferences and seminars.

Lastly, the researchers suggested having multiple case study methods with a large sample size of participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Acknowledgments

The researcher would like to thank the mother, who is 32 years old, for her invaluable cooperation in sharing her experiences of parenting a kid with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

We offer our highest honor and gratitude to the researcher for spending time and resources, sharing ideas and knowledge, being patient amidst hardships, enduring sleepless nights, and sacrificing some family and leisure time.

We sincerely thank our professor, Dr. Wenefredo E. Cagape, for sharing his expertise, giving advice, and extending his patience, time, and support in making this study succeed.

To our families, who give unending support – physically, emotionally, and financially, our highest honor and gratitude.

Above all, to our Almighty Father who gives us strength, blessings, knowledge, and wisdom and who made this study successful, all the glory, honor, and praise be unto Him.

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