

Navigating Parenthood with Autism: A Comparative Analysis of Stress and Anxiety

Priyanka Ghosh¹, Jeetendra Mohapatra², Lalit Narayan³

¹Rehabilitation Psychologist, Cross Disability Early Intervention Centre, National Institute for Locomotor Disabilities (Divyangjan), Kolkata.

²Lecturer, Department of Occupational Therapy & In-charge, Cross Disability Early Intervention Centre, National Institute for Locomotor Disabilities (Divyangjan), Kolkata.

³Director & HoD of Department of Occupational Therapy, National Institute for Locomotor Disabilities (Divyangjan), Kolkata.

ABSTRACT:

Ordinarily, the birth of children with autism is a big event that may present a challenge to families. It then makes them reconsider their plans, objectives, and relations since taking care of the child may not be easy and sets boundaries. The study will discuss the level of stress and anxiety experienced by parents of children with ASD. It also analyzes the influence of background of parents themselves and the hardship of taking care of their children on them.

Cross Disability Early Intervention Centre (NILD) in Kolkata selected 120 parents who had children with ASD. The parents belonged to West Bengal, other parts, India. Three analytical instruments were applied in the study: a demographic questionnaire, Parental Stress Scale, and the Generalized Anxiety Scale 7.

The findings indicate that mothers of children with autism report to be more stressed out as compared to their fathers. Another difference observed in the study was the marked difference between anxiety and stress in mothers and fathers. Also, the more a parent is anxious, the more he or she is stressed.

Keywords: Parent Stress, General Anxiety, Autism.

INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a brain condition that causes individuals to have difficulties communicating in socially related situations. It also restricts interest and may result in monotony. Over the last few years, the prevalence of ASD among individuals has increased, which demonstrates the necessity of autistic children and the psychological well-being of their parents. Raising a child with ASD can be emotionally and psychologically challenging to the parents as they need to provide full-time support, control the child through behaviour, occupational therapy, speech therapy and educational planning. The Cross Disability Early Intervention Centre (CDEIC) of NILD in Kolkata is an early assessment and intervention centre using multidisciplinary approach. It has approximately 200 patients every month.

Parents of autistic children are usually reported to experience more stress and anxiety as compared to parents of children who are normal or even those with other disability conditions. In her report, Emma Fisher concluded that autistic children place a lot of stress, anxiety, and depression on their parents. The

researchers indicated that 13.7% of parents had clinically significant stress and 9% high stress. Psychoeducation and emotional-support programs have been provided by researchers to assist parents (Dolores Merino -Navarro et al., 2025). Nikmat and others examined the psychological health and stress levels of parents whose children have ASD and discovered that 90.4% parents experienced severe parental stress. They managed to conclude that the parents of children with autism tend to be greatly psychologically disrupted. In their study, Raushan Alibe kova and others (2002) compared high incidences of stress and depression in parents whose needs were not met or just barely with those whose needs were met satisfactorily as a result of social acceptance. They discovered that working parents and those parents who perceived that they had strong friends did not become as stressed and anxious. They reached the conclusion that advancing the area of autism awareness and offering early intervention and detection to the caregivers could enhance the lives of parents and families.

Other studies indicate that the more educated individuals have lower levels of stress compared to those with lower education and parents of a child with ASD are more prone to stress compared to parents of two or three children (ChinhThi Minh Ha et al., 2024). According to Nishi Tripathi (2015), 81% of parents experience high levels of stress, meaning parents require counseling, training of therapists, and advice to adopt the most appropriate parenting techniques.

Despite the increased research in the field of autism, not much has been done concerning the mental health cost of having a child with autism, particularly in the low-awareness society with minimal institutional support. The need of the study is that, the increasing prevalence of Autism has created significant emotional and psychological challenges for parents, particularly those who are primarily caregivers. Therefore, this research will explore and compare stress and anxiety levels of parents with Autism Spectrum Disorder children, taking into consideration demographic variables and the problem of caregiving. The study will entail seeing parents who frequent Cross Disability Early Intervention Center in NILD, West Bengal, India. This research will contribute to the literature and will help in emphasizing that psychological support, parent training, and community-based interventions can increase the wellbeing of both the parents and children by delving into their psychological experiences.

METHODOLOGY:

Here we explain about the aim of the study, its objectives, hypotheses, population size that we will have, criteria of participants that could or could not take part, statistical analysis, and about the tools.

AIM

The study will examine the level of stress and anxiety experienced by parents to their children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. It will cross these emotions with the background of the parents and the difficulties they are having taking care of the children.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- An example is in West Bengal, India, where parents of children with autism live in anxiety.
- Consider the level of stress parents with autistic children experience in West Bengal, India.
- To determine the association of stress and anxiety in parents of a child with autism in West Bengal, India.

HYPOTHESES

- **Hypothesis 1:** There is no significant difference between anxiety of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder with regard to their gender, age, education, occupation, and economic status.
- **Hypothesis 2:** There is no significant difference between stress of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder with regard to their gender, age, education, occupation, and economic status.
- **Hypothesis 3:** There will be no significant relation between stress and anxiety among Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

SAMPLE

One hundred and twenty (120) parents who had a child with autism spectrum disorder were selected by purposive sampling technique at the Cross Disability Early Intervention Centre, NILD, Kolkata. The key information concerning the participants are as follows:

- **Age group:-** 18 to 60 & above
- **Equal gender ratio:-** 60 mothers and 60 fathers (different zones of West Bengal)
- Interested and cooperative.

INCLUSION CRITERIA

- Parent of an Autism Spectrum Disorder child with other disorders in the child are speech delay, intellectual disability, attention deficit hyperactive disorder, and specific learning disorders.
- The child has the mother and the father as its primary care givers.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA

- Family members without parents (grandparent, siblings, relatives).

TOOLS:

- **General Information Schedule:** It contains such items as the name, the address, the age, the gender, the education, the occupation, and the economic status.
- **Parent Stress Scale (PSS):** PSS was created by Berry and Jones in 1995 to assess the extent of parents feeling stressed. The scale has 101 items. There are 18 questions in some of the items enumerating the positive face of parenting in the form of emotional rewards and personal growth. The negative questions are concerned with the necessity of resources and the feeling of limitation. All questions have a 5-point Likert scale, which is strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree, and strongly agree. A score that is higher implies the presence of stress. The scale is highly reliable having a reliability of 0.96.
- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD):** The GAD-7 was developed by Dr. Robert and other parties in 2006. It has 7 questions. The respondents have the options: not at all, few days, more than half-days or almost every day. These questions determine the frequency and the intensity of the anxiety, including nervousness, worrying, or uneasiness. There are low, mild, moderate, and severe anxiety scores. It scores between 0 and 21 altogether. The scale is valid and reliable with the validity of the scale being 0.82 and reliability being 0.82.

ADMINISTRATION, SCORING AND STATISTICAL TREATMENT

A selected group of parents was provided with the general information schedule, PSS, and GAD-7 and told about all the items fully. We gathered their answers and verified the information. The scoring key was a standard scoring key, where scores were provided. Each group was to be made into tables. The general information schedule was computed in percentages. We calculated the standard deviation and the mean of all the variables and the total score. We compared groups by ANOVA and t -tests and we examined relationships by Pearson correlation.

Table 1 provides the percentages of the respondents based on gender, age, education level, occupation, and the level of income.

Variable		n	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	60	50%
	Female	60	50%
Age	Below 35 years	58	48.3%
	35 to 45 years	45	37.5%
	Above 46 years	08	7%
Education	Uneducated	05	4.2%
	School level	55	45.8%
	Higher education	60	50%
Occupation	Homemaker	56	46.7%
	Non-Professionals	34	28.3%
	Professionals	30	25%
Economic Status	Low	62	51.7%
	Middle	36	30%
	High	22	18.3%

SOURCE: PRIMARY DATA

In Table 1 we can observe that the parents were evenly distributed, 50% (N =60) consists of mothers and 50% (N =60) consists of fathers, respectively. 37.5% (N =45) were aged 35-45 years. A further 37.55% (N=45) consisted of those under 35 years old and had completed just school level (SSC and HS). A greater proportion of the respondents (N = 62; 51.7%) belonged to low economic status, 30% (N=36) to the middle status, and only 18.3% (N=22) to the high status. On occupation they were mostly homemakers (mothers; N=56) which is 46.7%. 28.3 % (N=34) non professionals such as skilled laborers, helpers, drivers, cooks, welders, tailors, or farmers. 25% (N=30) were professionals such as engineers, teachers, government workers, researchers, or businessmen.

Table 2 presents the mean, standard deviation, test value of anxiety score of the study participants as it is divided by gender, age, education, occupation and economic status.

Variable		N	Mean	SD	F Value	p Value (0.05 level)
Gender	Male	60	4.9	2.9	2.88	.092* S
	Female	60	6.2	5.0		

Age	<35	68	5.3	3.7	1.07	.344 NS
	35-45	45	5.7	5.0		
	>45	08	7.7	4.2		
Education	Uneducated	05	5.8	5.3	0.10	.901 NS
	School level	55	5.8	4.4		
	Higher Education	60	5.4	3.8		
Occupation	Home Maker	56	6.3	5.1	1.81	.168 NS
	Non Professionals	34	5.0	3.3		
	Professionals	30	4.8	2.5		
Economic Status	low	62	5.7	4.6	0.57	.565 NS
	Middle	36	5.9	3.4		
	High	22	4.7	3.8		

***p < .05 is significant**

According to table 2, the scores of mothers of children with autism regarding anxiety differ significantly with those of fathers ($F = 2.880$; $p < 0.05$). The age ($F = 1.079$; $p > .344$), education ($F = .104$; $p > .05$), economic status ($F = .574$; $p > .05$) and occupation ($F = 1.812$; $p > .05$) are not found significant in influencing anxiety scores and therefore, gender is the primary influencing factor with anxiety level among parents with children having autism and the **null hypothesis (H0 1) has been discarded**.

Table 3, The mean, standard deviation, F value and p-value of the study participants regarding stress by their gender, age, education, occupation, and economic status are presented in table 3.

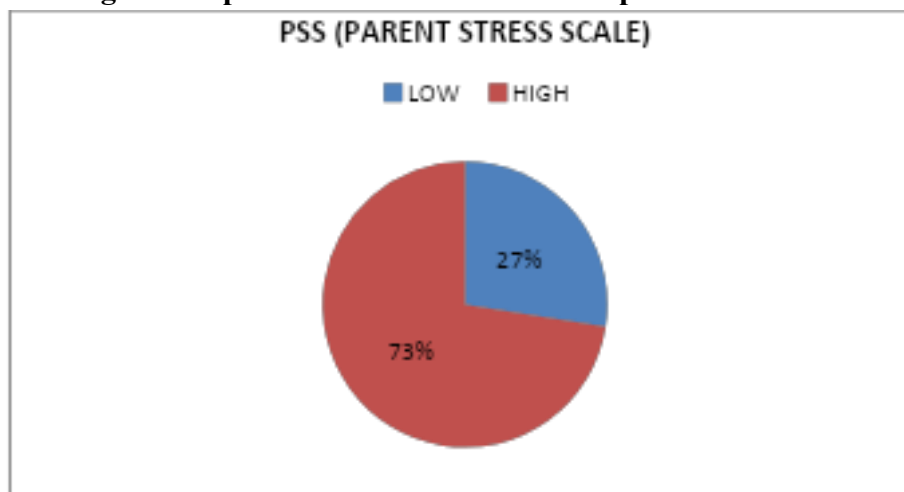
Variable		N	Mean	SD	F Value	p Value (0.05 level)
Gender	Male	60	39.4	5.6	9.47	.003 S
	Female	60	43.3	8.1		
Age	<35	68	41.1	7.6	0.57	.562 NS
	35-45	45	42.4	7.0		
	>45	08	42	5.6		
Education	Uneducated	05	41.4	6.8	1.07	.344 NS
	School Level	55	41.9	7.4		
	Higher Education	60	40.8	7.1		
Occupation	Home Maker	56	43.5	8.0	5.14	.007 S
	Non Professionals	34	39.6	5.9		
	Professionals	30	39.2	6.0		
Economic Status	Low	62	41.8	6.9	0.29	.747 NS
	Middle	36	40.9	7.1		
	High	22	40.7	8.3		

***p < .05 is significant**

As per table-3, mothers of autistic children are found to have a different score in anxiety when compared to his fathers ($F=9.473$; $p<0.05$). But the age ($F = .579$; $p>.05$), education ($F = 1.079$; $p>.05$), and economic status ($F = .292$; $p>0.05$) have no influence on the anxiety scores. In addition, there is a difference between the level of anxiety of professional and non-professional who work with children with autism as opposed to the homestayors ($F=5.147$; $P<0.05$).

In addition, the anxiety of the professional and non-professional workers dealing with children with autism is not comparable to that of homemakers ($F = 5.147$; $P>0.05$). The results, therefore, demonstrate a significant gender disparity in anxiety among parents of the autistic children. In case of the occupation of parents, there is a significant variation in occupational anxiety. **This implies that we reject the null hypothesis 2 (HO2).**

Figure 1 represents the level of stress of parents CWASD



The data provided in Figure 1 demonstrate that 72 % of the parents (87 people) were highly stressed, and 28% were less stressed. This implies that parents of autistic children experience a considerable amount of stress.

The anxiety level of parents of CWASD is depicted in figure 2. CWASD:

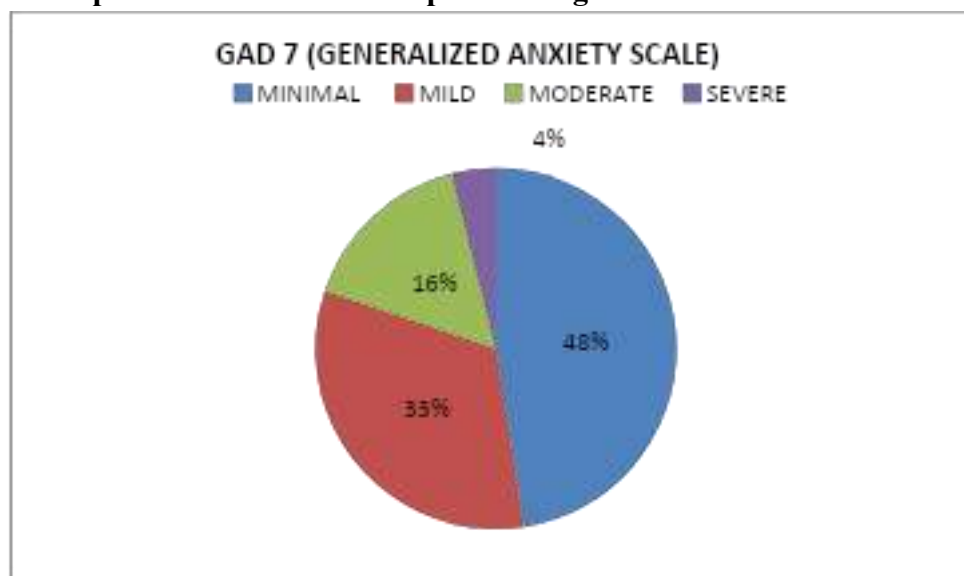


Figure-2 illustrates the scores of parents in terms of the levels of anxiety according to the GAD-7: minimal anxiety, mild anxiety, moderate anxiety, and severe anxiety. Majority parents 48% (58 individuals) are having minimal anxiety and 33% (40 individuals) also have mild anxiety. Nevertheless, the moderate level of anxiety is observed in 16% (19 caretakers).

Table-4 Correlation Between Parental Stress and Generalized Anxiety (N= 120)

Variable	1	2
Parental Stress	---	
Generalized Anxiety	.302**	---

r = Pearson Correlation Coefficient. **p < .01 (two tailed)

Table 4 shows the relationship of stress on parents and general anxiety. Our result was that there is a statistically significant relation existing between increased stress and increased anxiety in parents of children with autism. It implies that the more stressed out parents are the more the general anxiety that they develop. **We consequently discarded of the null hypothesis 3 (HO3).**

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION:

The research would like to know the level of stress and anxiety that parents experience when having a child with autism in West Bengal, India. In order to accomplish this, 120 parents of children with autism participated. The researchers utilized two of the most popular instruments, which are Parent Stress Scale (PSS) designed by Berry and Jones in 1995, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) test that was developed by Robert and others in 2006. PSS contains 18 questions regarding parental stress and the GAD-7 contains seven questions regarding anxiety. The data were presented with the help of simple statistics, Pearson correlation, and one-way ANOVA. The findings indicated that mothers experienced more anxiety and stress since compared to fathers, implying that gender is a possibility of influencing caregiving. This is similar to previous research in which Radhey and Kavita (2014) discovered that mothers of children with disabilities experienced more parenting stress. Depression and anxiety were also found in many of these mothers, and that is corroborated by Rachit and others in 2023. It is typical that mothers are the primary caretakers; therefore they feel more pressure and emotions and become more anxious compared to fathers, as claimed by Joseph and Chacko (2018). It is essential to know this in order to establish support to these families. The paper established as well that autistic children have parents associated with anxiety and stress. This is why we need to know what makes these parents stressed to be in order to reduce the load on the caregiver in the home and the psychological burden he/she has to bear.

Similar to other parent stress studies, parents with autistic children are exposed to numerous stressful issues which contribute to stress (Bilgin and Kucuk, 2010). It is mothers who are the most stressed when their children are more irritable, socially withdrawn, self-harmful, inadequate to depend on themselves, and unable to communicate and connect with other people (Karuppanan, Ramamoorthy et al., 2022). There is another study that indicates that mothers and parents of children with ASD experience much stress. It demonstrates that special support systems developed to meet the needs of such families are needed (Taleha Shahbaz and Sahrish Khalid, 2023). The researchers have discovered that sixty percent of the parents were moderately stressed. It also showed that over half of them resorted to coping mechanisms like seeking information, evading the issue or denial. Finally, the research indicated that the

correlation of stress levels with coping strategies was strong and positive (Mona, H Mostafa, 2019). The findings indicate parenting stress may be conditioned by the behavior issues of a child which may necessitate parents questioning their competence and the growth of anxiety disorder or mood disorders in mothers of children with ASD (Rezendes and Scarpa, 2011).

Parents of autistic children can be of great help by social support. They should receive assistance in the form of community camps, radio, newspapers, podcasts, and TV shows in local languages. Such platforms can exchange messages of good coping skills, resilience, and emotional well-being with parents. Moreover, brief training sessions may assist the parents to know how to assist their children in their daily chores as well as in other places by imparting essential skills to them.

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY:

The result of this study highlights that parents, especially mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, suffer higher levels of anxiety and stress. This indicates the importance of providing psychological support and counselling services to help parents manage the emotional challenges associated with raising a child with autism. The results also suggest the need for parent support programs and awareness initiatives that can equip families with effective coping strategies. Furthermore, more focus should be given to homemaker mothers, who may experience greater emotional burden due to continuous caregiving responsibilities. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of family-centered support and mental health services to improve the well-being of parents of children with autism.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

- The mothers of children with autism experience greater anxiety and stress as compared to fathers.
- Homemaker mothers are not an exception and experience more anxiety and stress than working parents.
- Autism and stress tend to coexist in parents with children with autism.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:

- The research can investigate the causes of stress among parents.
- It is also capable of analyzing the method of making clear treatment plans with children who have autism and intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities or other developmental issues.
- Further study can investigate coping mechanism used by parents.
- It can also analyze the culture and socioeconomic factors affecting parental stress.
- The research can evaluate the effectiveness of psychological interventions for parents.

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