

Parental Stress and Perceived Social Support Among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Correlational Study

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Abstract

Parenting a child with autism spectrum disorder involves ongoing caregiving responsibilities that can have a significant impact on the psychological well-being of parents. The present study aimed to explore the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism. A quantitative correlational research design was employed for the study, with a sample of 100 parents from Chennai selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered using the Parental Stress Scale and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The findings showed that the mean score for parental stress was 58.80, while the mean score for perceived social support was 49.38. The results led to the rejection of the null hypothesis, as a statistically significant negative correlation was identified between the two variables ($r = -0.956$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that higher levels of perceived social support are linked to lower levels of parental stress. These findings emphasize the importance of strengthening social support systems, including family, community, and professional networks, in helping to reduce stress and enhance the psychological well-being of parents of children with autism in today's caregiving environment.

1. Introduction

Parental stress can be understood as the emotional and physical strain that arises from the responsibilities of raising children. Unlike general stress experienced in everyday life, parental stress is closely tied to the specific demands of caregiving. It often includes emotional responses such as worry, frustration, and self-doubt, along with physical symptoms like tiredness and disturbed sleep. The level of stress experienced by parents can vary depending on several factors, including the child's characteristics, the family environment, and the extent of available support systems.

A number of factors contribute to parental stress. These may include behavioural difficulties in children, developmental concerns, financial pressures, lack of adequate social support, and work-related responsibilities. In addition, individual differences among parents such as coping skills, emotional resilience, and personal expectations play an important role in shaping how stress is experienced. While some level of parenting stress may be temporary and manageable, it can become chronic when these demands continue over a long period. Persistent stress can lead to emotional exhaustion, reduced well-being, and challenges in maintaining healthy parent-child relationships. It is important to note that stress

is highly subjective and depends on how individuals perceive and respond to different situations. When the demands of parenting exceed the resources available to cope with them, stress tends to become more intense and prolonged. Over time, this can have a negative impact on mental health, leading to issues such as anxiety, irritability, and decreased emotional involvement. It may also affect parenting behaviour, resulting in inconsistency in discipline and reduced responsiveness, which can further influence children's emotional and behavioural development.

Parental stress becomes even more significant in the context of raising a child with autism spectrum disorder. Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, social interaction, and behaviour. Caring for a child with autism often requires continuous attention, structured routines, and a high level of emotional adaptability. Parents may face additional challenges such as managing behavioural concerns, dealing with communication difficulties, and coping with social stigma. Furthermore, uncertainty about the child's future and limited access to appropriate resources can add to the ongoing psychological burden experienced by parents.

In such situations, perceived social support plays a crucial role in helping parents manage stress. It refers to an individual's belief that emotional, informational, and practical support is available from others, including family members, friends, and the community. Even when this support is not actively used, the perception that help is available can provide a sense of comfort and security. Social support may take different forms, such as emotional encouragement, guidance, validation, and practical assistance, all of which contribute to better coping.

For parents of children with autism, perceived social support serves as an important protective factor. It helps reduce feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation, while enabling parents to handle caregiving responsibilities more effectively. This sense of support can also enhance confidence and promote emotional stability. Therefore, the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support is particularly meaningful, as higher levels of perceived support are generally associated with lower levels of stress. At last, strengthening social support systems and improving coping strategies are essential for reducing parental stress and enhancing psychological well-being among parents, especially those caring for children with autism.

2. Literature Review

Bhatta et al. (2025) carried out a quantitative study involving 280 parents of children with physical disabilities to explore the relationship between perceived social support and parental stress. For data collection, the researchers used the Parental Stress Scale (PSS) along with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between perceived social support and parental stress, suggesting that parents who reported higher levels of support experienced lower levels of stress. The study further pointed out that certain groups, particularly mothers, parents with lower income, and those with lower levels of education, tended to experience higher stress. These results highlight the crucial role of social support in reducing the burden associated with caregiving. Similarly, **Lin et al. (2023)** conducted a study among 312 parents of children with autism spectrum disorder to examine how perceived social support is related to parental burnout. The study utilized multiple tools, including the Perceived Social Support Scale, the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), and the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA), to collect data. The analysis involved descriptive statistics, correlation, and mediation techniques. The results indicated that higher levels of perceived social support were linked to lower levels of parental burnout. In addition, perceived social support was found to mediate

the relationship between alexithymia and burnout. The study emphasized that social support plays a protective role by reducing emotional exhaustion and stress among parents of children with autism.

Zhao et al. (2022) conducted a study among acute stroke patients in China to investigate the relationship between physical disability, perceived social support, resilience, and depression. Standardized measurement scales were used to assess these variables. The findings showed that greater levels of physical disability were associated with increased depression. However, higher levels of perceived social support and resilience were found to significantly reduce depressive symptoms. The study highlighted the importance of social support as a protective factor that contributes to better mental health outcomes, even in challenging conditions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Question

The present study was undertaken to examine the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. The focus was on understanding how these two variables are connected within the context of caregiving.

3.2 Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To assess the level of parental stress among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder
- To evaluate the level of perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder
- To determine the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support

3.3 Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant relationship between parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder.

4. Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative, non-experimental, correlational research design in order to examine the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. This design was considered appropriate as it allows for the analysis of the association between variables without manipulating them.

4.1 Sampling Technique

The sample for the study was drawn from parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. A total of 100 parents voluntarily participated in the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, ensuring that only individuals who met the specific criteria relevant to the study were included in the sample.

4.2 Data Collection

- Data were collected using offline questionnaires that were distributed directly to the participants.
- Participants were first asked to provide their demographic information, followed by their responses to standardized instruments measuring parental stress and perceived social support.

4.3 Tool Description

Parental Stress Scale (PSS) by Berry and Jones (1995): The Parental Stress Scale consists of 18 items that assess both the positive and negative dimensions of parenting experiences. It follows a Likert-type response format, where higher scores indicate greater levels of parental stress. The scale has demonstrated

good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha value of approximately 0.83, along with satisfactory test-retest reliability, making it a reliable tool for measuring parental stress.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) by Zimet et al. (1988): The MSPSS is a 12-item instrument designed to measure perceived social support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others. It uses a 7-point Likert scale, where higher scores reflect greater levels of perceived social support. The scale has been shown to possess strong reliability and validity, with high internal consistency across its subscales and significant associations with measures of psychological well-being.

4.4 Statistical Analysis

The data collected for the study were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage, were used to analyse the demographic characteristics of the participants as well as the scores obtained from the scales. In addition, Pearson's correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support.

4.5 Inclusion Criteria

- Parents of children who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder
- Parents falling within the age range of 20 to 50 years
- Both male and female parents were considered for participation
- Participants who were residing in Chennai
- Parents who provided their voluntary consent to take part in the study

4.6 Exclusion Criteria

The following participants were excluded from the study:

- Parents of children who were not formally diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder
- Parents residing outside Chennai
- Parents who were below 20 years of age or above 50 years
- Parents of children with additional comorbid neurological or genetic conditions

5. Result

This chapter presents the findings of the study along with the analysis carried out to understand the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of parental stress and perceived social support among the participants. It presents the mean and standard deviation values for both variables.

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Parental Stress	58.80	18.426	100
Perceived Social Support	49.38	18.722	100

The descriptive analysis indicates that the mean score for parental stress is 58.80, with a standard deviation of 18.426, based on a sample of 100 participants. In a similar manner, the mean score for perceived social support is found to be 49.38, with a standard deviation of 18.722 for the same group of participants.

Table 4.2 shows the correlational analysis of parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder.

Variables	Pearson’s Correlation	r value	Decision
Parental Stress	1	-0.956***	Rejected (H ₀)
Perceived Social Support			

Further analysis using Pearson’s correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between the two variables. The results show a strong negative correlation between parental stress and perceived social support ($r = -0.956, p < 0.01$). This suggests that as the level of perceived social support increases, the level of parental stress tends to decrease among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. Since a statistically significant relationship was observed between the variables, it can be concluded that higher perceived social support is associated with lower parental stress. As the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, the null hypothesis (H₀: There is no significant relationship between parental stress and perceived social support) is rejected. Overall, the findings of the study confirm the existence of a significant negative relationship between parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder.

6. Discussion

The findings of the present study revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder ($r = -0.956, p < 0.01$). The mean score for parental stress was found to be 58.80 (SD = 18.426), while the mean score for perceived social support was 49.38 (SD = 18.722). These results indicate that higher levels of perceived social support are associated with lower levels of parental stress.

The findings of this study are in line with earlier research that emphasizes the role of social support in reducing stress among parents. For example, Bhatta et al. (2025) reported that parents who perceived greater social support experienced lower levels of stress while caring for children with disabilities. Similarly, Lin et al. (2023) found that perceived social support played a significant role in reducing parental burnout among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. The consistency of these findings strengthens the evidence that social support functions as an important protective factor in caregiving contexts.

The results of the present study suggest that although parenting a child with autism can involve increased demands and challenges, the presence of emotional and practical support enables parents to cope more effectively. Support from family members, friends, and the community can help in sharing responsibilities, providing reassurance, and reducing feelings of isolation. As a result, parents are better able to manage stress and maintain their overall well-being.

In addition, strong support systems appear to reduce the psychological burden associated with long-term caregiving. When parents feel supported, they are more likely to experience emotional stability and confidence in handling caregiving responsibilities. This not only benefits the parents but can also contribute positively to the family environment and the child’s development.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the importance of strengthening social support networks for parents of children with autism. Ensuring access to supportive resources, including family support, community programs, and professional services, can play a key role in reducing stress and improving family functioning.

7. Summary

The present study was undertaken to examine the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. Raising a child with autism often involves continuous caregiving responsibilities, which can have a considerable impact on the psychological well-being of parents. Factors such as emotional strain, ongoing caregiving demands, and limited access to resources may contribute to increased stress levels. At the same time, the presence of social support can help parents manage these challenges more effectively.

Parental stress and perceived social support are both important factors that influence the overall well-being of parents. Support received from family members, friends, and the wider community can play a key role in improving coping abilities, reducing emotional burden, and enhancing quality of life. In this context, the study aimed to examine whether a significant relationship exists between these two variables. The study was guided by the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between parental stress and perceived social support among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. Ethical considerations were carefully followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality, along with voluntary participation, was maintained.

Data were collected from 100 parents residing in Chennai using standardized instruments. These included the Parental Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Berry and Jones (1995) and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) developed by Zimet et al. (1988). The collected data were analysed using Pearson's product-moment correlation with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), in order to determine both the direction and strength of the relationship between parental stress and perceived social support.

8. Conclusion

The findings of the study show that parents of children with autism spectrum disorder experience lower stress when they perceive higher levels of social support. Support from family, friends, and the community plays an important role in reducing the emotional burden of caregiving and helps parents manage challenges more effectively.

At the same time, awareness of available support can sometimes highlight gaps where help may be lacking, which can influence how parents view their situation. Therefore, the relationship between social support and stress is not always simple, as it can both comfort and create awareness of unmet needs.

Overall, the study confirms a significant negative relationship between perceived social support and parental stress, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis ($p < 0.01$).

9. Limitations

The study had certain limitations that should be considered while interpreting the findings. The sample did not have equal representation of male and female participants and was selected from easily accessible special schools and therapy centres, which may limit the generalizability of the results. The study focused only on parents of children with autism spectrum disorder, and therefore the findings may not apply to other groups. Since the data were collected using standardized questionnaires, responses may have been influenced by individual perceptions, and no qualitative insights were included. In addition, the study examined the variables at a single point in time, making it difficult to establish cause-and-effect relationships. The research was also limited to a specific geographical area, and factors such as income, duration of caregiving, and personality traits were not taken into account.

10. Recommendations

The present study provides a foundation for future research aimed at reducing parental stress among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. Future studies can include larger and more diverse samples to improve the generalizability of findings. Considering additional demographic variables may also provide deeper insights into the factors influencing parental stress. Moreover, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can help in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of parental experiences. Overall, the findings highlight the need to strengthen social support systems in order to better support parents and improve their well-being.

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