

Caregiver Perspectives in Autism Interventions: Attachment, Responsive Relationships, and Play-Based Approaches

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Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that requires early intervention to support children's developmental outcomes. The role of caregivers as active partners in interventions has received more attention. The role of caregivers in autism interventions is examined in this literature review, with particular attention paid to caregiver participation, attachment-informed caregiver-child relationships, play based approaches, and the CARER Model. Caregiver responsiveness, emotional availability, and active participation have supported communication, social interaction, and developmental engagement according to the reviewed literature. Play-based and family-centered approaches enhance learning by including intervention strategies into everyday routines and encouraging child-led interactions. The CARER Model shows how culturally relevant and caregiver-mediated interventions can integrate these principles within practice. Overall, the literature shows a shift towards family-centered models that have recognised caregivers as essential partners in autism interventions and highlighted the importance of culturally responsive, relationship-focused approach's for supporting autistic children and their families.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, caregivers, parent-mediated intervention, attachment, play-based intervention.

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition which includes challenges with social communication, and restrictive interests, along with repetitive behaviour (Hodges et al., 2020). Since autism is considered a lifelong condition, there is an ongoing need for services and support, as the nature and severity of difficulties vary across individuals with ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). Intervention at an early age is recognised as an important component in supporting developmental outcomes, with evidence suggesting that interventions delivered during early childhood can help to improve communication and social engagement (Oono et al., 2013). Autism interventions have traditionally focused on the child as the primary recipient of services, however, there has been an increase in recognition of the influential role that the caregivers play in supporting developmental progress and intervention implementation (Salomone et al., 2021; Settanni et al., 2023).

Growing focus on caregiver the involvement, has led to a shift from child-focused intervention models towards family-centred and caregiver-mediated approaches. Parent-mediated interventions consider that caregivers are active participants in the intervention process rather than passive recipients of professional

guidance (Conrad et al., 2021; Rao et al., 2024). These approaches aim to equip caregivers with strategies that can be used in the day-to-day activities which, increase opportunities for learning and development beyond structured therapy sessions (Bradshaw et al., 2022; Oono et al., 2013). Similarly, Balachandran and Mohanraj Bhuvaneswari (2024) highlighted the growing importance of caregiver centric interventions, emphasising the role of family members in supporting the developmental needs of children with neurodevelopmental disorders.

An increase in involvement of caregivers in the intervention has also promoted higher attention to the relational process that influences child development. Attachment based perspectives emphasise the significance of caregiver responsiveness, emotional availability, and relationship quality in facilitating the social and emotional growth among autistic children (Fernández-Cuenca & Alonso-Arbiol, 2026). Rather than focusing only on the development of specific skills, these approaches highlight the caregiver-child relationship as a meaningful context through which development and engagement can be supported.

Alongside attachment-informed perspectives, play-based and responsive engagement approaches have also gained importance in the autism intervention research. These approaches utilise naturally occurring interaction, child-led activities, and everyday experiences as opportunities to help communication and social participation (Schreibman et al., 2021). Parent-mediated interventions that integrate responsive engagement, encourage caregivers to follow the child's interests and actively take part in creating meaningful learning opportunities within familiar environments (De Korte et al., 2022). The development of culturally adaptable models that are responsive to family needs, stakeholder perspectives and local context while supporting a strong emphasis on caregiver participation and play based learning (Yadav et al., 2026).

These developments reflect a broader movement towards recognising caregivers as central contributors to autism interventions. Understanding caregiver perspectives, attachment-based relationships and play based approaches may offer valuable insights into how caregiver-mediated interventions support the developmental, social, and emotional needs of autistic children. Examining these interconnected themes is crucial for informing family-centred intervention models that recognise caregivers as key partners in the intervention process.

The main aim of the paper is to explore the role of caregivers in autism interventions, with a focus on attachment-based relationships, responsive caregiver-child interactions, and play based approaches that support child development and engagement.

2. Method

This paper employs a narrative literature review to explore the role of caregivers in autism interventions. Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles were found and chosen through searches of Google Scholar, Pubmed and Springer based on their relevance to caregiver participation, attachment-informed interventions, play-based approaches, and the CARER model. The selected literature was critically reviewed and synthesised to provide an overview of current evidence regarding caregiver-mediated autism interventions.

3. Caregiver Perspectives and Participation

The growing recognition of caregivers as active participants in autism intervention strategies has resulted in a significant shift towards family-centred and caregiver-mediated approaches. Intervention models traditionally have involved professionals delivering services directly to children. Contemporary research

however acknowledges caregivers as essential partners in the intervention process because they are recognised for their unique understanding of their children's strengths, challenges, preferences, and daily experiences (Balachandran & Mohanraj Bhuvaneswari, 2024; Oono et al., 2013; Schreibman et al., 2021). A broader movement towards collaborative intervention models that value caregiver knowledge and involvement reflect a shift in supporting developmental outcomes (Dunst, 2002).

Caregiver participation has become a vital aspect of autism intervention which emphasises on equipping parents with strategies that can be incorporated into daily interactions and routines. Involvement of caregivers increases the learning opportunities which are beyond structured therapy sessions and allows the intervention to occur within familiar and natural environments (Oono et al., 2013; Schreibman et al., 2021). Balachandran and Mohanraj Bhuvaneswari (2024) emphasised the importance of caregiver centric interventions, showing that family members also play an important role in supporting the developmental needs of children with neurodevelopmental disorders. By including intervention strategies in daily activities, caregivers can offer consistent opportunities for engagement, communication, and skill development, which can foster learning in natural and familiar environments (Rogers et al., 2012). Research has also shown that active involvement in intervention programmes can affect positively on caregiver confidence and competence (Salomone et al., 2021).

Parent mediated approaches provide caregivers with practical skills and knowledge that are more effective in supporting their child's communication, social interaction, and behavioural development. (Salomone et al., 2021). In their qualitative study of Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT) parent group training, De Korte et al. (2022) found that caregivers valued opportunities that helped them to learn about the intervention strategies and reported an increase in confidence while applying the intervention techniques in everyday family settings. The study also highlighted that the caregivers have appreciated gaining a deeper understanding of their child's needs and learning how to respond more effectively during daily interactions.

Caregiver perspectives offer valuable insights into the acceptability and relevance of intervention programmes beyond skill development. Bent et al. (2022) when designing and implementing autism interventions highlighted the importance of understanding parental experiences. Their findings suggest that caregivers value interventions that are practical, accessible, and responsive interventions which align with the realities of families. Parents expressed appreciation for approaches that value their experiences and perspectives which highlighted the importance of active involvement in the intervention process. These findings reinforce the view that caregiver participation goes beyond intervention delivery and involves meaningful involvement in shaping intervention goals, and implementation strategies. Professional support and collaboration are also key factors that influence caregiver participation. Intervention effectiveness often relies on strong partnership between the caregiver and professional, with ongoing guidance, coaching, and feedback helps in supporting the implementation of the intervention strategies (Stahmer et al., 2016). Balachandran and Mohanraj Bhuvaneswari (2024) have emphasised the importance of collaborative approaches that recognise caregivers as active contributors to intervention planning and delivery. These partnerships can enhance caregiver engagement while ensuring that intervention strategies are relevant to the child's and family's individual needs.

Another important aspect of caregiver participation is the opportunity for peer support and shared learning experiences. The PRT parent group training study has shown that caregivers have received support through interaction with other parents facing similar experiences and challenges (De Korte et al., 2022). Such interactions among caregivers provide emotional support, practical advice, and the exchange of strategies,

which later contribute to a sense of community among caregivers. Such experiences may help caregivers in reducing feelings of isolation and build them confidence in implementing the intervention approaches within the home environment.

This literature highlights the role of caregivers in autism intervention. They are recognised as active stakeholders because caregiver participation, experiences, and perspectives influence the implementation and sustainability of the intervention (Balachandran & Mohanraj Bhuvaneshwari, 2024). By creating a supportive environment caregivers promote learning and development in peer support network through their involvement in the intervention delivery, professional collaboration, and engagement (De Korte et al., 2022). Hence, understanding the perspectives of caregivers is significant in developing a family-centred intervention model that is responsive to the needs of autistic children and their families (Balachandran & Mohanraj Bhuvaneshwari, 2024; Bradshaw et al., 2022).

4. Attachment Theory and Caregiver-Child Relationships

The increased focus on caregiver involvement in autism interventions has also led to greater recognition of the importance of caregiver child relationships in supporting developmental outcome (Conrad et al., 2021). Attachment theory proposes that early relationships between children and their caregivers also plays a key role in shaping the social, motivational, and communicative development (Bowlby, 1969). While autism is characterised by differences in social communication and interaction, autistic children can form meaningful attachment relationships with their caregivers (Teague et al., 2017). Attachment-based approaches have become a key area of autism intervention research (Teague et al., 2017).

Fernández-Cuenca and Alonso-Arbiol (2026) highlighted that attachment-based interventions focus on strengthening the quality of caregiver- child relationships by increasing caregiver-responsiveness, emotional availability, and sensitivity to the children's needs. These approaches believe in the understanding that children benefit from consistent, supportive, and responsive interactions with their caregivers. Rather than targeting isolated development skills, attachment-based interventions help to enhance the environment in which learning and development occur.

A central principal of attachment-based intervention is caregiver responsiveness (Fernández-Cuenca & Alonso-Arbiol, 2026). Fernández-Cuenca and Alonso-Arbiol (2026) have found responsiveness as the caregiver's ability to recognise and interpret and appropriately respond to a child's communication attempts, behaviours, and emotional cues. Such responsiveness supports the development of trust, security, and engagement within the caregiver child relationship. The review has also reported that interventions that are designed to improve caregiver responsiveness were associated with improvements in caregiver-child interactions and relationship quality. These findings have also suggested that responsive caregiving has also played a crucial role in supporting the social and emotional experiences of autistic children.

Emotional availability is another key part of attachment- informed approaches (Fernández-Cuenca & Alonso-Arbiol, 2026). According to Fernández-Cuenca and Alonso-Arbiol (2026), an emotionally available caregiver can provide consistent emotional support while reminding attentive to their child's needs and signals. This emotional connection can help in creating a secure environment for children to feel supported to communicate, explore, and engage with others. Attachment-based interventions therefore place considerable emphasis in strengthening emotional connections as a foundation for development growth.

In the review Fernández-Cuenca and Alonso-Arbiol (2026) also emphasised the importance of relationship quality within autism interventions. Positive caregiver- child relationships were associated with improved

social engagement and emotional functioning highlighting the role of relationships as more than simply a context for interventions delivery. Instead, the caregiver-child relationship in-itself was viewed as an important mechanism through which developmental progress can be supported. This perspective shifts attention from isolated intervention techniques towards the broader experiences that shape the children's everyday interactions.

The importance of caregiver responsiveness and relationship quality is also reflected within broader caregiver-mediated intervention research. Bradshaw et al. (2022) noted that effective parent-mediated interventions encourage caregivers to respond sensitively to the children's interests, communication attempts, and development needs. Similarly, caregivers that take part in the Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT) parent group programme reported developing a greater understanding of their child's behaviours and learning strategies that improved their interactions within contexts (De Korte et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the attachment-based view that responsive and supportive caregiver-child interactions can contribute to meaningful development experiences.

Attachment-informed principles are also reflected in the emerging family-centred intervention models such as the CARER Programme. Yadav et al. (2026) highlighted the importance of responsive engagement and meaningful caregiver-child interaction within play-based intervention activities. The programme encourages the caregivers to engage actively with their children through shared experiences, the programme also supports relationship building while promoting communication and social participation. Attachment theory aligns closely with these approaches by recognising that development may occur within the context of supportive and responsive relationships.

The literature speaks about the importance of attachment-based perspectives in understanding caregiver involvement within autism interventions. Fernández-Cuenca and Alonso-Arbiol (2026) showed that caregiver responsiveness, emotional availability, and relationship quality are main components of attachment-based approaches. With findings from caregiver-mediated and family-centered intervention research, these studies suggest that an important foundation for supporting social, emotional, and communicative development in autistic children is also due to strong caregiver-child relationship.

5. Play-based and Responsive Engagement Approaches

Play-based and responsive engagement approaches have gained importance in the autism intervention research because of their focus on naturalistic learning opportunities and active caregiver involvement (Schreibman et al., 2021). These approaches have replaced structured teaching environments and have instead utilised play, everyday routines, and child-led activities as contexts to support communication, social interaction, and developmental learning. They have understood that if learning happens through meaningful activities that are linked to children's interests and preferences then then learning is more engaging (Bradshaw et al., 2022).

Bradshaw et al. (2022) discussed the increasing evidence that supported parent-mediated interventions with a naturalistic, developmental, and behavioural components. These strategies facilitated interaction between the caregiver and child, during daily routines and provide opportunities for learning in familiar environments. Naturalistic interventions focus on knowing the child's interests and motivations so that the environment can be setup to create learning around activities that are already of interest. This is different from the more adult-dominated models where the child is actively involved in the learning process and is not passive.

Play is an essential part of communication, social interaction, and relationship building (Bradshaw et al., 2022). Shared play experiences is a great way to develop interaction, demonstrate communication, and encourage social engagement in a fun and age-appropriate manner. To maintain a focus on positive and responsive interactions, Bradshaw et al. (2022) emphasised that play-based activities provide caregivers to foster communication and social skills development, which helps to maintain positive and responsive interactions. By embedding intervention strategies within play, learning becomes naturally integrated into experiences rather than being limited to formal intervention sessions.

Responsive engagement is another key feature of caregiver-mediated interventions (Bradshaw et al., 2022). Caregivers are encouraged to observe and respond to their child's interests, communication attempts, and behavioural cues. They are encouraged to follow the child's lead and create opportunities for shared engagement. Bradshaw et al. (2022) explain that responsive interactions support social communication development which increases opportunities for meaningful interaction and participation within everyday activities.

Responsive engagement is also evident in caregiver experiences reported within parent-mediated intervention programmes. De Korte et al. (2022) found that caregivers that participated in the Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT) parent group training, learned strategies that helped them to engage more easily with their children during daily interactions. Parents described gaining a deeper understanding of how to follow their child's interest and use naturally occurring situations as opportunities for engagement. These findings help in knowing the practical value of responsive approaches that can be easily integrated into family routines.

The CARER Programme demonstrates the application of play-based and responsive engagement principles within autism intervention. Yadav et al. (2026) described that development of culturally relevant, play-based, parent mediated intervention that is designed for the Indian context. The programme puts an importance on caregiver participation, shared play experiences, and responsive interactions as the main components in the intervention. The CARER Model is an approach that involves the caregiver in the active participation of communication, social participation, and developmental learning through the development of the caregiver's role and a family-centered design.

Play-based and responsive approaches also closely align with family-centered intervention principles. Integration of intervention strategies into the routine and familiar environment provides for constant learning outside of the therapist's office. This recognises caregivers as active facilitators of development and values natural environment in giving support to the transfer of skills across different settings (Bradshaw et al., 2022; Yadav et al., 2026).

Play and responsive engagement are highlighted as crucial aspects of caregiver-mediated interventions (Bradshaw et al., 2022; De Korte et al., 2022). These approaches provide for child participation, communication, and social interaction, as well as developmental engagement in meaningful day to day contexts, through the use of child-led activities, shared play experiences, and naturally occurring learning opportunities. The focus on caregiver participation and family-centred practice provides a foundation for understanding the development and significance of caregiver-mediated models like the CARER Programme.

6. The CARER Model

The growing recognition of caregivers as active participants in autism intervention has contributed to the development of family-centred and caregiver-mediated programmes that can be implemented in everyday

contexts (Conrad et al., 2021). A model that has been developed in India for autistic children is the CARER Programme, developed by Yadav et al. (2026) as an early intervention model. The programme was designed for culturally relevant, easily accessible, and caregiver-focused interventions, which considers that families play an essential role in child development.

A crucial aspect of the CARER Programme is its stakeholder-informed development process. Yadav et al. (2026) stressed on the importance of including the perspectives of caregivers, professionals, and other stakeholders while developing the programme. The programme was aimed at bringing together those who work directly with the person who has autism, and was designed to meet the challenges of families, as well as ensuring relevance of the intervention strategies to the local context. This co-operative strategy is consistent with other family-centred principles that value the input and participation of the caregiver in intervention planning and implementation.

The CARER model also emphasises the importance of cultural adaptation within autism interventions. There are many evidence-based autism programmes developed in the west and may not necessarily fit with the cultural, social, and service contexts of other countries. Therefore, Yadav et al. (2026) centred their efforts on creating an intervention that was responsive to the needs, experiences, and realities of families in India. The focus on cultural relevance was intended to enhance the cultural acceptability, feasibility, and sustainability of intervention delivery to caregivers and children.

Play-based and caregiver-mediated approach is another important aspect of the CARER Programme. This aligns with contemporary intervention research, which encourages caregivers to actively participate in supporting their child's communication, social interaction, and developmental learning (Yadav et al., 2026). Rather than viewing professionals as the sole providers of intervention, the model recognises caregivers as active facilitators of learning, who can create meaningful opportunities for engagement within familiar environments. This approach is consistent with findings from Bradshaw et al. (2022) which demonstrated the effectiveness of parent-mediated interventions that utilise naturalist and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities.

Responsive engagement represents another important principle within the CARER model. Play is encouraged with follow-up and involvement of caregivers when their child indicates contact. This helps to build engagement and relationship building (Yadav et al., 2026). A focus on responsiveness is consistent with attachment-informed and caregiver-mediated intervention approaches. These approaches promote developmental outcomes by recognising the value of supportive caregiver-child interactions (Bradshaw et al., 2022; Fernández-Cuenca & Alonso-Arbiol, 2026).

The CARER Programme further reflects a family-centred philosophy by recognising the strengths, needs, and experiences of caregivers. Balachandran and Mohanraj Bhuvaneswari (2024) highlighted the growing importance of caregiver-centric interventions that empower families and promote active participation within the intervention process. The CARER model emphasises that caregivers are key to their child's development and aims to provide caregivers with simple-to-implement strategies that can be easily incorporated into the everyday lives of families (Yadav et al., 2026).

The CARER Programme is one example of the ways in which caregiver involvement, responsive engagement, play-based learning, and cultural adaptation can be integrated into a family-centred intervention model. The programme reflects many principles found in the literature by establishing caregivers as active partners and recognising the importance of culturally relevant intervention design. As such, the CARER Model offers a concrete example of how caregiver-mediated approaches can support

the developmental, social, and communicative needs of autistic children while considering family contexts and local situations.

7. Conclusion

In this literature review, the role of has caregivers in respect to autism intervention has been examined more specifically caregiver participation, attachment-informed relationships, and play-based approaches. Across the literature, caregivers are constantly recognised as active stakeholders whose involvement is not only supporting intervention implementation but also becoming central contributors to the children's developmental experiences. The growing recognition towards the role caregivers play in everyday contexts by promoting communication, social engagement, and developmental learning shows a shift towards caregiver-mediated and family-centered approaches.

The review highlighted the need for perspectives and participation of the caregivers in the intervention processes. Caregiver-centric and parent-mediated approaches emphasise in empowering caregivers with knowledge, skills, and support for them to actively contribute to the intervention delivery. Research suggested that caregiver involvement provided learning and development opportunities and fostered a connection between families and professionals.

There is a significant focus in the literature regarding the importance of caregiver-child relationships in interventions for autism. As highlighted in the attachment-informed perspectives the aspects of caregiver responsiveness, emotional availability, and relationship quality are important to social and emotional development. The importance of responsive and supportive interactions in relationships fosters engagement and communication in developmental growth.

Play-based and Responsive engagement approaches highlight the importance of the role of caregivers in supporting learning through naturalistic interactions and everyday experiences. Through intentional communication, social engagement, and developmental learning opportunities made possible through child-led activities, shared play, and familiar routines, caregivers can help develop communication, social participation, and developmental learning. These approaches acknowledge that intervention can occur beyond formal therapy settings and can be integrated into daily family life.

The CARER Programme is a successful case study of caregiver participation, responsive engagement, play-based learning, and cultural adaptation within a family-based intervention model. The programme sees caregivers as active partners and considers families cultural and contextual needs.

In general, the literature suggest that caregivers are an integral part of current autism interventions. Approaches which create supportive environments that foster developmental, social, and communication prioritise the involvement of caregivers, responsive relationships, and play-based engagement. Constant emphasis on family-centred and culturally relevant intervention models will empower the ability of caregivers to support their children's development in meaningful everyday contexts.

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