

Attachment, Mentalization and Parenting Processes in Autism Caregivers: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder which has an impact not only on the child but also the overall family dynamics. Attachment processes, parent's reflective functioning and behaviour has an impact on child's developmental trajectories which in return influences the caregiver's internal processes. Various contextual and social factors such as financial and social stress, caregiver's well being and parent-child social reciprocity has an impact on this dynamic. In this narrative review, the connections between these constructs were studied and how it functions more as a transactional framework rather than independent variables. The study adopted a comprehensive literature review through various databases like PubMed, PsyINFO, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar. The study also incorporated thematic areas that were utilised for segregated data extraction. Findings suggest connections between caregiver's attachment representation, mentalization and parenting processes in children with ASD.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Caregiver Attachment, Parental Mentalization, Parenting Process

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition which is characterised by persistent difficulties in social communication and social interaction alongside restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 1992). A child can start showing symptoms of ASD, such as reduced eye contact, lack of response to their own name, etc, as early as six months old. This has an impact on how the child behaves, communicates and even adapts to various situations. However, the effect of ASD isn't restricted just to the child, but also the close ones that are associated with them, especially their family members and caregivers. The initial diagnosis of their child with ASD has a huge impact on their daily lifestyle and routine for they also serve as the primary environment for the child's social, emotional and adaptive development. Furthermore the reciprocal relationship between the child's characteristics and parent's caregiving needs can make it challenging for them.

Parents and caregivers frequently experience emotional stress and increased burden associated with caregiving demands, concerns about the child's future and challenges managing behavioural difficulties. These experiences can, in return, hamper how the caregiver responds to the child's needs. Caregiver's

attachment styles influence how parents perceive, regulate and respond to their child's emotional and behavioural cues. Parental mentalization, which is the ability to understand behaviour in terms of underlying emotions, supports sensitive, flexible and emotionally aligned caregiving.. Parenting processes represent the behavioural expression of the parents' psychological processes, and it directly influences the quality of parent-child relationships. These factors are essential as differences in communication, emotional expression and social reciprocity may make it more challenging for caregivers to perceive their child's unique patterns of communication and emotional expression.

While the volume of research on Autism Spectrum Disorder has increased, significant studies on the relationships among caregiver attachment styles, parental mentalization and parenting processes have not been comprehensively examined within a single framework. Understanding how these constructs interact may provide valuable insights on mechanisms through which family processes influence child outcomes and may identify potential targets for family centered interventions designed to promote the caregiver's mental health and the child's overall development. Therefore the present narrative review aims to examine the theoretical and empirical literature on caregiver attachment styles, parental mentalization and parenting behaviors in families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and highlights their implications for understanding family functioning and informing intervention approaches in ASD.

2. Method

The present study employed a narrative review methodology to synthesize and examine the literature on caregiver's attachment representations, parental mentalization and parenting processes in families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The review employed various thematic areas to conceptualize a framework explaining a child's developmental outcomes as a result of reciprocal relationships between the child and the caregiver. The main objective of the review was to study how these psychological resources and external behaviour of both the parents and child collectively influence the child's social, emotional and adaptive functioning.

2.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted to identify relevant theoretical and empirical studies examining caregiver's attachment, parental mentalization and parenting reciprocal processes in families of children with ASD. Electronic searches were performed using PsycINFO, PubMed, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar. Reference lists of relevant articles and research papers were manually searched to identify additional studies. Studies were selected by screening titles and abstracts that were relevant to the review objectives.

Search terms were selected around four primary domains of interest: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Caregiver Attachment Representation, Parental Mentalization and Parenting Processes. Search terms typically included these keywords: "autism spectrum disorder", "ASD", "children with autism". "Caregiver attachment", "parental attachment", "attachment styles", "attachment security", "parental mentalization", "parental mind-mindedness", "parenting behaviour", "parental sensitivity", "parent-child relationships"

2.2 Inclusion Criteria

Studies were considered for inclusion if they met the criteria as below:

1. Peer-reviewed publications and scientific journals were included reporting empirical data.
2. Families with children with the diagnosis of ASD were selected.

3. Papers published only in English were considered.
4. The study examined at least one of the core constructs of interest:
 - Caregiver attachment style, attachment security, or attachment representations
 - Parental Mentalization, Parental mind-mindedness
 - Parenting behaviour, Parenting sensitivity, parent-child relationships

2.3 Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded from consideration if they met any of the following criteria:

1. Did not focus on any of the primary constructs mentioned.
2. Focused on other diagnosis other than ASD
3. Papers that targeted grey literature, dissertations, unpublished manuscripts or editorials.
4. Focused on single-case studies
5. Reviews that did not provide findings specifically relevant to autism

2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

The literature was organized into four major thematic areas:

- A. Caregiver Attachment Representation and their influence on parenting
- B. Parental Mentalization and Reflective Functioning in families of children with ASD
- C. Parenting processes and parent-child interactions
- D. Interrelationships Among, Attachment, Mentalization and Parenting Processes

During the search strategy, 27 research studies were found which met the inclusion criteria. Within each theme, findings were compared and recurring patterns were identified that would showcase the areas of convergence for child development and family functioning. Special attention was given to papers where child characteristics and caregiver factors mutually influence one another over time. The synthesis also considered contextual factors such as parenting stress, caregiver mental health, family adaptation and intervention outcomes that may mediate or moderate these relationships.

3. Results

3.1 Historical Context and Family System

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth have presented the theory that a child tying to its mother is an innate neurobiological system designed for safety and protection (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 2015). Even so, mothers were still being blamed for causing autism, referred to as “Refrigerator Mothers”, which means that they were blamed for being cold, distant, and having an emotionally unresponsive parenting style. It was incorrectly hypothesized that a lack of emotional stimulation from the parents had caused their children to develop autism, and thus it was advised that the parents ought to be completely separated from their children (Crowell et al, 2019). The theory was eventually rejected in the 1960s as evidence clearly stated that Autism isn’t caused by the parenting environment but rather by neurodevelopmental genetic issues (Ansari et al, 2020; Bogoi, 2023).

Early observations of the syndrome noted characteristics for “extreme autism aloneness” and a lack of social awareness. Observations were made that usually parents were “cold-hearted”, “having limited genuine interest in people,” and “being preoccupied with abstractions”. These observations were termed as being symptoms for “Broader Autism Phenotype,” which includes subclinical personality and language traits that are a milder version of autism (Crowell et al. 2019). Research shows that it is frequently found in parents and siblings of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The presence of BAP further supports the genetic basis of autism and may influence family interactions, parental

adjustment, and caregiving experiences. The hypothesis that autism has a genetic basis is further supported by their family dynamics, parenting processes and caregiving experience (Oppenheim et al, 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that these parents have a more directive style of parenting, which can create a transactional process where the child's social impairment and the parent's BAP traits can lead to parental stress and hamper each other (Siller & Sigman, 2002; Ahmad et al, 2026)).

3.2 Caregiver Attachment and Parent-Child Relationship

The attachment process between caregivers and their children with ASD is dynamic and reciprocal and plays an important role in the child's social, communicative, and overall developmental outcomes (Seskin, 2008). Contrary to earlier beliefs, children with autism are capable of forming secure attachment relationships with their caregivers. According to recent studies, approximately 47%-53% of children with ASD develop secure attachment relationships with their caregivers, which consists of showing unique attachment behaviours different from typically developing children. (Cibralic, 2025). Being a parent to a child with ASD includes having higher caregiving demands, difficulties interpreting atypical social cues, financial strain, and concerns about the child's future (Kurzrok et al, 2021). As a result, research shows that caregivers experience higher levels of stress as well as frequently report elevated levels of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance (Seskin, 2008). Despite that, the overall distribution of attachment style is a lot similar to the typical population, suggesting that raising a child with ASD does not predispose one to having an insecure attachment style.

Caregivers with a secure attachment style have been associated with greater emotional availability, responsiveness, and confidence in caregiving, which facilitates a child's communication skills, language development, social competence, emotional regulation and adaptive behaviour (Seskin, 2008). They are more likely to seek and utilize social support effectively, maintain a sense of autonomy and competence, and report higher levels of psychological well-being, including greater self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and purpose in life (Kurzrok et al, 2021, Jung & han, 2025). Additionally, maternal secure base script knowledge, which means reflecting the caregiver's internalized understanding of attachment relationships, has been identified as an important factor for predicting children's social competence and peer acceptance (Chandler, 2015; Yarger, 2025).. All of these findings suggest that secure caregiver attachment provides a protective context for the child, which helps in positive growth in social, emotional and behavioural development while also facilitating resilience in these children (Bogoi, 2025). In contrast to this, insecure attachment styles have been associated with less favourable developmental outcomes in children with ASD (Cibralic, 2025). It has been linked to increased parenting stress, psychological distress, and directive parenting, which can lead to the child's poor social and behavioural outcomes (McGuire, 2025). Maternal attachment-related avoidance and anxiety have been linked to increased externalizing behaviours, poorer social competence and reduced peer acceptance (Yarger, 2025). Insecure attachment in a caregiver may also harm the caregiver's ability to respond sensitively to their child's emotional and communicative needs, which can lead to higher parenting stress and less responsive caregiving. These associations may contribute to a transactional cycle in which caregiver stress and child behavioural difficulties mutually reinforce one another, leading to poorer outcomes for both.

3.3 Attachment and Caregiver Well-Being

Contemporary research suggests that caregivers' psychological adjustment is shaped not only by the severity of their child's condition but also by a dynamic interplay between an individual's psychological resources and caregiving demands. Multiple Regression Analysis shows that secure attachment style in

mothers can be a positive indicator of overall psychological health, and they tend to report higher levels of self-acceptance, environmental control, and purpose in life (Bogoi, 2023). Factors such as a parent's emotional regulation capacity and their ability to cognitively reappraise or find meaning in their child's diagnosis are vital contributors to maintaining well-being (Kurzrok et al. 2021, McGuire, 2025).

However, parents relatively face disproportionately higher levels of stress, including anxiety, depression and exhaustion (Kurzrok et al., 2021; Ansari et al., 2020), compared to parents of typically developing children (Tarver et al., 2019). The presence of externalizing behaviour like aggression and non-compliance due to the “stress proliferation cycle,” which refers to how a primary stressor can create a chain reaction that can spawn additional secondary stressors, leading to a negative psychological impact in the caregiver (Northrup, 2026). Parents also experience “hyperawareness” where they are in a state of constant vigilance, monitoring sensory triggers and anticipating dysregulation in the child which can lead to physical and emotional burnout (McGuire, 2025).

Research shows that in many contexts, such as New Delhi, mothers face "affiliate stigma" which refers to external blame for their child's condition and thus leading to intense feelings of guilt, shame, and social isolation (Lockwood Estrin et al. (2023). They report reduced participation in social activities due to fear of public misunderstandings of their child's condition and possibly a lack of social and communal support. These factors of social isolation and social stigma can induce feelings of guilt, shame and loneliness (McGuire, 2025). Conversely, collective parenting can relieve the individual burden and provide multiple perspectives that enrich the parent's representation of the child (Lockwood Estrin et al., 2023).

Parents of ASD children are reported as “high users of service”, where they manage multiple therapies at once along with their primary caregiving responsibilities (Kurzrok et al., 2021). These therapies and intervention programs, while often necessary for the child's development, create substantial financial, temporal, and social strain on the family system (Bogoi, 2025). Evidence from studies in India shows that mothers perceive these interventions to “cost a lot”, noting substantial lifestyle changes and alteration to family life.(Lockwood Estrin et al. (2023). Interestingly, study shows that financial burden has a direct negative impact on parents' psychological well-being and self-efficacy, which indicates that parents' mentalization of these challenges may enable parents to appraise stressful circumstances more adaptively, mitigating their perceived burden (Kurzrok et al., 2021).

3.4 Mentalization is Autism Parenting and Diagnostic Resolution

Contemporary research operationalizes parental mentalization into three interrelated constructs, where each offers a distinct perspective on the caregiver-child dyad: mind-mindedness (MM), Parental Reflective Functioning (PRF) and Parental Insightfulness (PI). Mind-mindedness refers to the parent's spontaneous tendency to represent their child as an individual with a mind. Research shows that parents often use fewer mind-related descriptors for their autistic child and instead emphasize ASD symptomatology, such as rigid routines or sensory sensitivities (Ansari et al, 2020). This shift suggests that the salience of the disorder may mask the parent's orientation to the child's unique mental characteristics, particularly as symptom severity increases (Jung & Han, 2025). PRF refers to the effortful ability to reflect on how mental stress influences behaviour. Surprisingly, compared to a typical child, parents of children with ASD, reported having demonstrated “reflective effort”, where caregivers work hard to decode the idiosyncratic and non-traditional communicative signals in their child (Enav et al. 2020). Parental Insightfulness involves the capacity to see things from the child's point of view in a flexible, positive and child-centred manner (Lee et al. 2024). This concept is rooted in attachment theory

(Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 2015), where it conceptualizes the emotional and cognitive functioning for sensitive caregiving (Oppenheim et al, 2009). Empirical evidence suggests that a mother's insightful and resolved state of mind enables caregivers to look beyond ASD symptoms and respond sensitively to their child's subtle attachment signals (Teague et al. 2017).

In families of children with ASD, parental insightfulness is closely associated with diagnostic resolution, enabling caregivers to look beyond ASD symptomatology and recognize their child's strengths (Oppenheim et al. 2009). Reaction to Diagnosis Interview (RDI), a semi-structured clinical interview, has been used to assess the parents' resolution, which showed that mother who have been classified as insightful and resolved are significantly more likely to foster secure child attachment compared to mothers who lack it (Lee et al.2024). Findings show that diagnostic resolution is generally independent of the child's objective characteristics, showing child's lower IQ or autism severity doesn't hamper the parent's own psychological adaptation (Oppenheim et al. 2024). Fostering resolution enhances parental self-efficacy and supports the child's long-term socio-emotional development (Cuenza, 2026).

3.5 Parenting Behaviour and Child Outcomes

The impact of parenting is most evident across four primary domains: communicative development, social-emotional functioning (attachment), behavioural regulation, and long-term adaptive outcomes. Maternal synchronization is a strong predictor of long-term developmental gains in ASD, which facilitates caregivers' ability to coordinate verbal and behavioural responses with the child's spontaneous focus of attention and ongoing activity (Siller & Sigman, 2002). High maternal synchrony and responsiveness, particularly following the child's lead, promote child-initiated joint attention and support the development of social reciprocity (Crowell et al. 2019).

Parenting practices greatly influence the prevalence and severity of externalizing behaviours such as aggression, non-compliance and tantrums (Suvarna et al. 2024). A secure parenting style is associated with fewer levels of externalizing behaviour and low aggression (Baumrind, 1971), whereas authoritarian parenting styles has been associated with higher levels of child's externalizing behaviour problems (Tarver et al. 2019). Hence, effective "limit setting" within a sensitive framework is encouraged (Suvarna et al. 2024). In this context, parent-mediated interventions (PMIs) have proven effective in improving interactional quality and have demonstrated significant secondary benefits for children's IQ and overall cognitive development. (Crowell et al. 2019, Cuenza. 2026).

4. Discussion

The relationship between Caregiver Attachment Representation, Parental Mentalization and Parenting Outcomes shows that they are interdependent constructs that collectively shape the developmental outcomes in children with ASD. Parenting processes and child's developmental outcomes are influenced by a dynamic caregiving system including caregiver's mental state, contextual and social factors and reciprocity between parental outcomes and child behaviour. Understanding of these relationships will provide a broader perspective on how a caregiver's behavioural processes affects the developmental outcomes of their child with ASD and how it functions more as a bidirectional framework rather than independent factors.

Within this framework caregiver's attachment representation includes the foundational psychological process that maintains attachment security. It includes attachment styles, parenting styles as well as levels of attachment security. These factors can influence how a parent responds to their child's unique representation of communication and social outcomes. Attachment styles reflect caregiver's internal

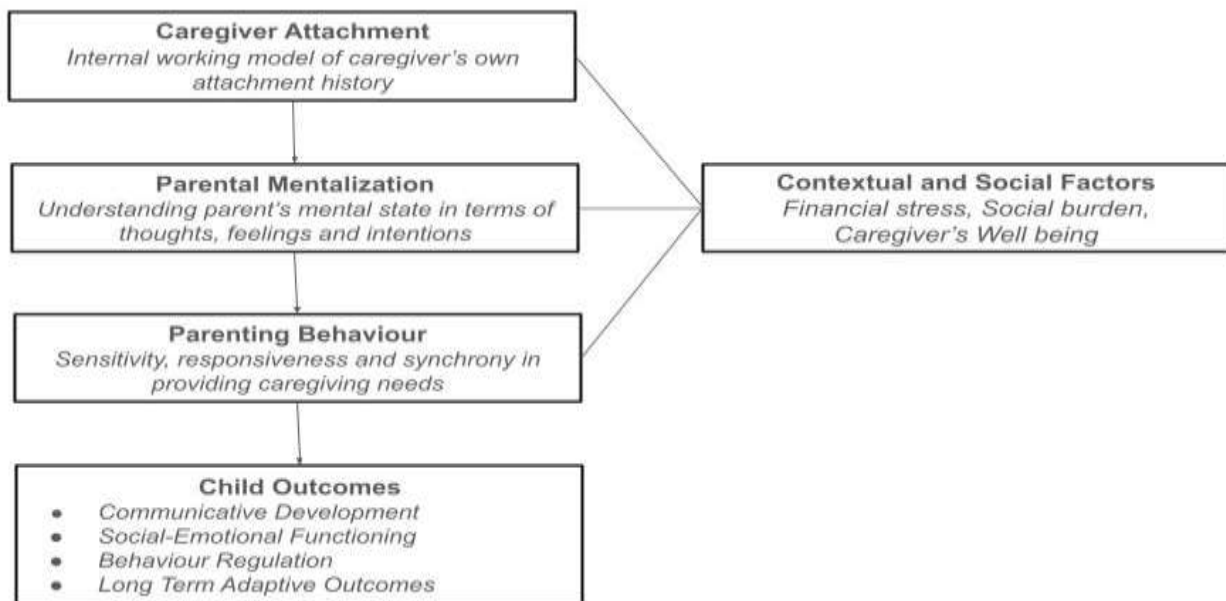
working models, which influence how they perceive, interpret and respond to their child's emotional and behavioural cues. This review also suggests that caregiver's attachment representation is deeply associated with caregiving demands, financial stress, social support or burden and caregiver's mental well being. These contextual factors have the potential to either strengthen or compromise caregivers' attachment security by influencing their psychological resources, emotional regulation and

Caregiver attachment subsequently influences parental mentalization, which serves as the central psychological mechanism linking caregivers' internal representations to their observable parenting behaviour. Parental mentalization includes constructs like parental reflective functioning, mind-mindedness and parental insightfulness where each construct displays the caregiver's ability to understand the child in terms of underlying thoughts, feelings and intentions rather than solely focusing on their child's observable behaviour. Effective mentalization enables caregivers to appreciate and understand their child's unique expression of communicative and social pattern and helps respond to their child in a more reflective and flexible manner.

These internal mentalizing capacities are translated into parenting practices through daily interactions between parent and child. Caregivers who have greater attachment security and enhanced mentalization are more likely to showcase sensitivity, responsiveness and better emotional expression compared to parents who have weaker attachment representation and reduced mentalization who are more susceptible to intrusive, directive and dysregulated parenting responses. Parenting behaviour therefore represents the behavioural expression of the caregiver's attachment process and mentalization abilities, providing the immediate relational environment within which children learn to communicate, manage their emotions and adapt to their environment.

In summary, it can be concluded that these factors act as a bidirectional framework where a caregiver's attachment representation influences their reflective functioning, which in turn influences parenting behaviour for ASD population. Parenting behaviour and child's behavioural outcome has impact on one another, affecting the parent-child relationships and family dynamics. Furthermore, the quality of these interactions influences various domains of child development including communicative development, socio-emotional functioning, behavioural regulation and long term adaptive outcomes. Improvements in these areas goes beyond childhood, by helping facilitate greater autonomy, better adaptive functioning, improved social relationships, increase in academic participation and overall quality of life. It also benefits the caregiver's well being and promotes family systems by strengthening caregiver confidence, reducing parenting stress and enhancing family functioning. This whole framework provides a comprehensive understanding of family processes in ASD and supports the development of attachment-informed, mentalization-based and family centred interventions that strengthen caregiver resources, enhance parent-child relationships and promote positive developmental outcomes for children with ASD.

Figure 1: Transactional Model of Attachment, Mentalization and Parenting Processes and Child Outcome



5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

The review explored the connections between the roles of caregiver's attachment representation, parental mentalization and parenting processes in influencing developmental outcomes for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The finding supports the hypotheses that these constructs operates as a transactional framework rather than independent variables. A caregiver's attachment style and security impacts how they mentalize their child's behaviour and also how they adjust to their autism diagnosis. The way a parents views and perceives their child's externalising autism behaviours has impact on the child's development in the subsequent years.

Additional to these factors, contextual and social factors such as financial burden, social stress and caregiver's well being has also been highlighted as moderating factors in caregiver's overall mental well being. The findings also support the idea of integrating attachment represented, family centered approaches into clinical approaches while also emphasising the need for longitudinal studies, standardized measures and diverse samples. Improvements in these areas will contribute to more effective and personalised interventions for the family of children with ASD.

5.2 Clinical and Research Implication

The findings from this review highlight that caregiver attachment, parental mentalization and parenting behaviours support a shift towards transactional and family-centred models of care. Interventions are moving forward from "child-focused approaches to recognizing the parent-child relationship as a primary organizing team, making necessary interventions that move beyond child-only clinical targets to position caregivers as active "co-therapists". Clinically, interventions should help parents look beyond surface "ASD symptomology" to recognize subtle or non-traditional attachment signals. Interventions should be tailored to a caregiver's baseline insightfulness for maximum clinical utility. Interventions that strengthen parental reflective functioning and improve caregiver sensitivity and synchrony may improve both caregiver-child relationship quality and the child's developmental outcome. Furthermore,

individualized support based on the caregiver's baseline reflective capacities may increase the effectiveness of the intervention.

5.3 Future Direction for Research

Methodological Standardization is needed in the assessment of attachment and parental mentalization in ASD populations to improve comparability across studies. Longitudinal research is needed to examine the transactional and bidirectional relationships among caregiver characteristics, mentalization, and parenting behaviour across different sociocultural contexts. Randomized controlled trials should investigate whether improvements in parental reflective functioning and insightfulness serve as a mechanism underlying the effectiveness of parent-mediated interventions. Future studies should recruit more representative samples by including children with varying levels of cognitive abilities, varied support needs and families with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, research examining the broader autism phenotype and social support as potential moderators and mediators of caregiving outcomes will help inform the development of more personalized, family-centred interventions.

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