

Social Support and Support Need as Predictors of Parenting Stress of Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Lagos Nigeria

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Abstract

Because of the particular difficulties involved in providing care, mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) frequently endure high levels of stress. Limited access to resources and social support in Lagos, Nigeria, makes this stress worse, underscoring the need for studies on variables that can lessen these impacts. This study, conducted in Lagos, Nigeria, explored the relationship between social support, support needs, and parental stress among mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Employing a descriptive survey design, the research involved 100 mothers of children with ASD. Data were collected using the Coping Health Inventory for Parents (CHIP), the Family Needs Questionnaire (FNQ), the Social Support Scale (SSS), and the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI). Hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 significance level, with multiple linear regression analysis and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) used to examine correlations and the predictive influence of the variables. The study revealed significant positive correlations between parenting stress and social support ($r = .31, p < 0.05$), as well as between parenting stress and support needs ($r = .21, p < 0.05$). The findings suggest that higher levels of social support and the fulfillment of specific support needs are associated with lower parenting stress. Emphasizing the crucial role of strong social support networks and the satisfaction of these needs, the study highlights the importance of targeted interventions and policies aimed at enhancing the well-being of mothers of children with ASD in Lagos, Nigeria, and strengthening their caregiving capacity.

Keywords: Social Support, Parenting Stress, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Support needs,

Introduction

Parenting is inherently challenging, but the stress experienced by parents, particularly mothers, of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be overwhelming. ASD is a complex developmental disorder characterized by significant deficits in social interaction, communication, and the presence of repetitive behaviors or restricted interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Recent research suggests a rise in the worldwide occurrence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in recent years. According to a 2022 systematic study, the median prevalence among children globally was 1%, which is higher than previous estimates (Sun et al., 2022). According to the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021, around 1 in 127 individuals globally are thought to be on the autistic spectrum (Global Burden of Disease Study, 2024). According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), roughly 1 in 36 children in the US had an ASD diagnosis by 2020. Improved screening techniques and broader diagnostic criteria are mostly responsible for this increase (CDC, 2025). The strain of raising an ASD child places significant emotional, physical, and financial demands on families, with mothers often shouldering the majority of these responsibilities. The role of primary caregiver is frequently assumed by mothers, who must navigate the complex needs of their child while managing their own stress and

well-being (Boyd, 2002). Mothers may experience increased stress, worry, and even despair as a result of the demanding and ongoing nature of caring for a child with ASD, making it crucial to understand and address the factors that contribute to their well-being (Abbeduto *et. al.*, 2004).

Social support refers to the availability of assistance and comfort provided by family, friends, and the community, encompassing emotional, informational, and practical help (Lindsey & Barry, 2018). It acts as a buffer against stress, helping individuals manage difficult situations. In contrast, support needs are the specific requirements or resources that an individual feels necessary to cope effectively with challenges (Boyd, 2002). While social support involves the external provision of help, support needs focus on the internal assessment of what is required to alleviate stress. Understanding both constructs is crucial, as even when social support is available, unmet support needs may still lead to heightened stress if the assistance provided does not align with what is genuinely needed.

In many cases, the lack of adequate social support exacerbates the challenges faced by these mothers. Social support, which includes emotional, informational, and practical assistance, is a critical buffer against the stress associated with parenting a child with ASD. Studies have shown that mothers with strong social support networks experience lower levels of stress and are better able to cope with the demands of caregiving (Lindsey & Barry, 2018). Conversely, the absence of such support can lead to feelings of isolation and increased psychological distress, making the experience of providing care even more difficult (Boyd, 2002). It is unclear, meanwhile, if caregivers of children living with ASD in Lagos, Nigeria, experience the same relationship between social support and less parenting stress. In order to better understand how local characteristics may affect the efficacy of social support networks for these women, this study intends to investigate this link within the particular setting of Lagos.

Furthermore, it is impossible to ignore the financial strain that comes with being a caregiver of a child having ASD. Many families struggle to access specialized services, therapies, and educational resources necessary for the child's development, which can lead to significant economic strain. In Nigeria, where public support and healthcare services for children with ASD are often inadequate, the financial challenges can be particularly severe (Adebowale-Tambe, 2022). This situation is compounded by the cultural stigma associated with ASD, which can further isolate families and limit their access to essential resources and support (Bakare & Munir, 2011).

Given these challenges, it is evident that more needs to be done to support families, particularly mothers, in Nigeria who are live with children having ASD. Enhancing social support networks, increasing access to specialized services, and addressing the cultural stigma associated with ASD are critical steps that could reduce the stress experienced by these families and improve their overall well-being.

In Lagos, the difficult situation encountered by mothers caring for children have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are significantly intensified by the observed lack of adequate social support systems, limited access to specialized healthcare, and a general scarcity of resources tailored to their unique needs. Bakare and Munir (2011) highlighted that in many parts of Nigeria, including Lagos, public awareness and healthcare services for ASD remain underdeveloped, leading to inadequate support for families. Additionally, Adebowale-Tambe (2022) reported that the financial burden associated with accessing necessary therapies and treatments might be quite difficult for children with ASD in Nigeria, often resulting in severe stress for caregivers, with a focus on mothers, who serve as the primary caregivers. The demands of caregiving not only increase stress levels but also have detrimental effects on the mental and physical well-being of these mothers. According to Al-Kandari *et. al.*, (2017), mothers of children with ASD who lack sufficient social support are more likely to experience elevated stress, anxiety, and depression. While these studies provide valuable insights, there remains a gap in understanding how these dynamics specifically play out in Lagos, where cultural, economic, and social factors might influence the efficacy of available support systems. By examining the degree to which parental stress among mothers of children with ASD in Lagos is predicted by social support and support requirements, this study seeks to close this knowledge gap and provide localized data to guide focused interventions.

This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the relationship between social support and parenting stress among mothers of children with ASD in Lagos. By examining how social support influences parenting stress, the research seeks to generate insights that can inform the development of targeted interventions and policies. These efforts would enhance the well-being of these mothers and strengthen their ability to provide quality care for their children.

The objective of the study is to:

- examined the extent to which social support and support needs predict parenting stress among mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Lagos, Nigeria

The following hypothesis guided the study:

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between social support and parenting stress of mothers of children with ASD

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between support need and parenting stress of mothers of children with ASD

Methodology

In order to investigate the predicted associations between social support, support needs, and parental stress among mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Lagos, Nigeria, the study used a descriptive survey approach. This design was chosen because it allows for the collection of data that can describe the current conditions and explore relationships between variables in a natural setting without any manipulation. The study population consisted of mothers residing in Lagos, Nigeria, who have children diagnosed with ASD. A sample of 100 families of children with ASD was selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure participants met the study criteria. The mothers were recruited from special schools and inclusive schools in Lagos, where children with special needs learn alongside other students. Additionally, participants were drawn from therapy centers where children receive interventions such as physical and speech therapy. Data collection spanned approximately one month. In some cases, researchers engaged directly with the mothers to assist with questionnaire completion, while in others, schools facilitated the process by allowing the questionnaires to be distributed and later retrieved within 2–3 weeks. The selected sample size was deemed sufficient for the planned statistical analyses, given the study's focus on a specific subgroup within the population. Four standardized instruments were used to collect data for the study:

- **Social Support Scale (SSS):** This scale measures the perceived availability and adequacy of social support in the lives of the participants. It includes various dimensions of support such as emotional, informational, and practical support.
- **Family Needs Questionnaire (FNQ):** Families with children with ASD have unique support needs, which are evaluated by the FNQ. It addresses topics including respite care, educational services, healthcare access, and financial help.
- **Coping Health Inventory for Parents (CHIP):** The coping mechanisms used by parents to deal with the stress of raising a kid with ASD are assessed by this tool. It evaluates various coping techniques, such as those that are problem-, emotion-, and support-focused.
- **Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI):** The PSI measures the level of stress experienced by parents in their role as caregivers. It provides a comprehensive assessment of the stressors related to parenting a child with ASD, including the child's demanding behaviors, difficulties in parent-child interactions, and the parent's perceived lack of competence or support. Examples of such stressors include managing challenging behaviors, balancing caregiving with other responsibilities, and feelings of isolation or inadequacy in the caregiving role.

Over the course of about a month, respondents were given standardized questionnaires to complete in order to gather data. The questionnaires were distributed in person at ASD support groups and special education centers in Lagos. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. In some instances, the research team sat with participants to assist with questionnaire completion, particularly for those who required clarification of certain questions. At some schools, the questionnaires were left with staff and collected after 2-3 weeks, allowing participants ample time to complete them at their convenience. Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyze the gathered data. The demographic features of the individuals were compiled using descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts and percentages. To investigate the connections among parenting stress, support requirements, and social support, Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was utilized. The predictive ability of social support and support requirements on parenting

stress was evaluated using multiple linear regression analysis. To guarantee that the results would be dependable and statistically sound, all hypotheses were examined at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Table 1

Demographic Information of Respondents

Variable	Frequency (n = 100)	Percentage (%)
Age		
20-30 years	25	25%
31-40 years	50	50%
41-50 years	20	20%
Above 50 years	5	5%
Level of Education		
Secondary School	40	40%
Tertiary Education	55	55%
Postgraduate	5	5%
Marital Status		
Married	80	80%
Single	10	10%
Divorced/Widowed	10	10%

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Analysis Between Social Support, Support Needs, and Parenting Stress

Variables	Social Support	Support Needs	Parenting Stress
Social Support	1.00	-	-0.31**
Support Needs	-	1.00	-0.21*
Parenting Stress	-.031**	-0.21*	1.00

**Note: $p < 0.05$ indicates statistical significance.*

The study's findings showed a substantial negative association (correlation coefficient of -0.31; $p < 0.05$) between parenting stress and social support. This research suggests that moms' experiences of parental stress diminish as the amount of social support they have access to rises. Similarly, the study discovered a negative association between parenting stress and support needs, with a correlation coefficient of -0.21 ($p < 0.05$). This implies that these moms' levels of parenting stress are decreased when their unique support needs are suitably met.

Table 3
Multiple Linear Regression Analysis for Predicting Parenting Stress

Predictor Variables	B	SE B	Beta (β)	t	p
Social Support	-0.35	0.11	-0.30	-3.18	0.002**
Support Needs	-0.28	0.13	-0.25	-2.15	0.034*
Constant	5.21	0.45		11.58	0.000***

*Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

With a beta coefficient of -0.30 ($p = 0.002$), the research showed that social support is a significant predictor of parenting stress. This suggests that there is a considerable correlation between reduced parenting stress and more social support. Similarly, with a beta coefficient of -0.25 ($p = 0.034$), support needs also showed up as a significant predictor. This implies that moms' stress levels are lowered when their unique support needs are better met. Overall, the model shows that moms of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) suffer varying degrees of stress depending on social support and meeting support needs.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings, which showed a strong positive relationship between parenting stress, support requirements, and social support, are in line with another research on the subject. According to the research, moms, who are frequently the primary caregivers, may experience a variety of pressures related to raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which can negatively affect their wellbeing. The research highlights that social support plays a crucial role in mitigating these stressors by providing emotional, informational, and practical assistance, which can help mothers manage the challenges of caregiving. Such support may include emotional encouragement from family and friends, access to relevant information about ASD management, and practical help with daily caregiving tasks or respite care. McConnell, Savage, and Breitreuz (2019) found that these forms of support not only reduce feelings of isolation but also enhance mothers' capacity to cope with the demands of caregiving. This finding underscores the importance of a robust support system in promoting the well-being of mothers caring for children with ASD.

According to the study's literature analysis, which included studies highlighting the value of social support in lowering stress among parents of children with ASD, there is a strong negative association between social support and parenting stress ($r = -0.31$, $p < 0.05$). For example, the thesis cites research by Boyd (2002) and Lindsey and Barry (2018) that shows mothers of children with ASD who had greater social support have lower levels of stress and psychological discomfort. The current study's findings support this by showing that increased social support is linked to decreased parenting stress, underscoring the value of a robust support network for these mothers.

According to the results of the current study, these types of support are useful in reducing stress among mothers of children having ASD. This is probably because they offer both emotional and practical support, which makes mothers feel less alone and more equipped to handle their caregiving duties.

The research argues that unmet support needs significantly contribute to stress in mothers of children with ASD. This is reinforced by the study's finding of a negative correlation between parenting stress and support needs ($r = -0.21$, $p < 0.05$). The article cites research showing that mothers' stress levels rise when their unique support needs—such as access to specialist healthcare, educational opportunities, and financial aid—are not satisfied. This is supported by the current study, which shows that meeting these support requirements well is essential to lowering parenting stress.

This finding also ties into the challenges faced by mothers in Lagos, Nigeria, where resources for supporting children with ASD are often limited. The research emphasizes the critical need to enhance both informal support (such as family and community networks) and formal support systems (including healthcare, educational, and respite services) to address the diverse needs of these mothers. The significant correlation between support needs and parenting stress identified in this study underscores the importance of targeted interventions. By accurately identifying and addressing the specific support needs of these mothers, such interventions could significantly reduce their stress levels and enhance their overall well-being.

Conclusion

In light of the results, policymakers and practitioners are advised to create focused interventions to improve social support systems and offer specialized resources and services. Support groups, training programs, and easier access to specialized medical and educational services are a few examples of initiatives that could successfully lower parenting stress and enhance the wellbeing of these mothers. Building a sustainable support framework requires cooperation between governmental organizations, nonprofits, and neighborhood associations.

Recommendations

It is advised that policymakers and practitioners create focused interventions to improve social support systems and offer specialized resources and services in light of the findings. Parenting stress might be successfully decreased and these moms' wellbeing could be enhanced by initiatives like support groups, training programs, and easier access to specialist healthcare and educational facilities. To create a structure for long-term support, cooperation between governmental bodies, nonprofits, and neighborhood associations is crucial.

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