



Childhood Autism and Parental Well-being: Conceptual Insights into Quality of Life

Payale Aanand* & Mustafa Nadeem Kirmani**

* Dr. Payale Aanand, Academic Counsellor, IGNOU, Psychology Department & Rehabilitation Psychologist,
Amarjyoti Charitable Trust, Delhi, India
ORCID-0009-0002-8523-6719

Contact details: drpayaleaanand@yahoo.com, 99993 43418

** Associate Professor (Clinical Psychology), Amity Institute of Clinical Psychology, Amity University Haryana

Abstract

Purpose

This paper conceptually explores the relationship between child autism and parental quality of life, emphasizing emotional, social, and health-related implications in caregiving contexts.

Design & methodology approach

A systematic conceptual approach synthesizes existing literature on child autism, parental stress, resilience, and healthcare frameworks, integrating theoretical perspectives from psychology, family systems, and health sciences to propose holistic understandings of parental wellbeing.

Findings

The study identifies conceptual pathways linking autism-related caregiving demands to diminish parental quality of life, while highlighting protective factors such as resilience, social support, and integrated health interventions.

Future scope

This conceptual analysis is limited to literature synthesis, suggesting the need for future empirical validations. Implications highlight the necessity of cross-disciplinary frameworks integrating psychology, healthcare, and family systems to enrich parental quality-of-life research.

Practical Implications

Healthcare and policy frameworks should emphasize family-centered approaches, addressing not only children's needs but also parental wellbeing through stress-reduction programs, early interventions, and community-based support.

Originality

This study uniquely positions autism as both a child-specific and family-wide challenge, offering novel conceptual integration across developmental, psychological, and healthcare domains to better understand parental wellbeing trajectories and inform holistic family-centered practices.

Keywords: Childhood autism; parental stress; parental well-being, quality of life;

Introduction

Autism and autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) are life long neurocognitive development disorders affecting sociability and communication for which no etiology-based treatment has yet been developed. Leo Kanner described it in 1943. He found some children who found it difficult to relate to others, a failure to use language to convey meaning and an inordinate desire for the maintenance of the same. Epidemiological studies have shown a rapid increase in the prevalence of ASD in recent years, with a prevalence of four to five times more in boys than girls. The prevalence of ASD in the world was 0.6%. Subgroup analyses indicated that the prevalence of ASD in Asia, America, Europe, Africa and Australia was 0.4% , 1%, 0.5%, 1%, 1.7% respectively. Studies in India indicates 1 in 65 Indian children between the age group of two and nine are affected by ASD . Up to 1.8-2 million children in India are thought to have ASD.

This review on the topic was performed according to using some of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines. Electronic databases such as Science Direct, PubMed, Scopus, SID, Magiran, Web of Science, and Google Scholar from 2008 to July 2021 were searched to find related studies. A comprehensive search was performed using the following keywords: Childhood autism; parental stress; quality of life; family systems; resilience & healthcare.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) presents diverse developmental challenges impacting family well-being. Parental quality of life is frequently affected by caregiving responsibilities. Existing literature shows gaps in integrating child outcomes with parental experience. Studies have emphasized social, behavioral, and psychological burdens for parents (Nadeem et al., 2024). Research further highlights stress, stigma, and socio-cultural barriers for caregivers. Parental mental health requires equal consideration as child developmental outcomes. This concern highlights the urgent need for multidimensional intervention approaches. Coping resources and cultural influences strongly shape caregiver adjustment processes. Thus, autism's impact must be understood across both child and parental contexts.

Parenting autistic children involves continuous psychological strain and lifestyle reorganization. Global evidence emphasizes increased parental anxiety, stress, and depression symptoms (Samadi et al., 2020). Caregivers report compromised sleep, social relationships, and financial burden across life stages (Jenabi et al., 2025). Neurodevelopmental impairments among children often worsen parents' psychosocial well-being trajectories. Stigma and discrimination compound stress among caregivers in diverse cultural contexts (Libster et al., 2025). Resilience factors include hope, optimism, and social support systems (Chang et al., 2025). Conversely, low support worsens parental mental health and relational stability (Wang et al., 2022). Pandemic studies highlighted digital isolation and increased caregiving demands (Stadheim et al., 2022). Caregivers expressed concerns over long-term interventions and cost-effectiveness (Shields et al., 2025). Quality of life (QoL) for parents is closely linked to service access. Many studies indicate inadequate autism services impact parental well-being (Almasoud & Alqahtani, 2023). The unique interplay of contextual, psychological, and cultural factors remains underexplored. Social interaction, sport, and motor programs show mixed effectiveness for families (Svensson et al., 2024). Research in low-resource countries emphasizes cultural differences in caregiving (Nguyen et al., 2025). Sleep management for children further influences parental exhaustion and distress (Shi et al., 2025).

Quality of Life studies highlight greater vulnerabilities among mothers compared to fathers (Jenabi et al., 2025). Future interventions should integrate both child development and caregiver well-being (Green et al., 2022). Caregivers advocate for holistic support addressing family systems, not individuals. Psychosocial therapies and community-based approaches present promising directions (Lovell et al., 2023). This paper therefore seeks to consolidate knowledge and address conceptual gaps. The current literature emphasizes fragmented outcomes requiring a holistic integration framework. Integrating neuroscience, psychology, and social support can strengthen parental adaptation. Hence, a conceptual approach is essential for advancing research and practice. This paper contributes by proposing a framework linking autism and caregiver QoL.

Caregivers' lived experiences highlight diverse domains influencing their quality of life. Psychological distress, stigma, and cultural values significantly shape parental adaptation processes. Emotional well-being and social support strongly influence coping and resilience (Ferenc et al., 2021). Evidence shows sleep and lifestyle factors aggravate parental stress over time (Ergün & Demirci, 2025). Emotional burden is often heightened by restricted access to interventions (Eow et al., 2020). Parental conceptualizations of autism further mediate family

functioning (Neely-Barnes et al., 2011). Pandemic-induced disruptions have highlighted gaps in community-based support models (Iovino et al., 2021). Longitudinal data remain limited, reducing insight into evolving parental trajectories (Samadi et al., 2020). Resilience-focused interventions are promising but underexplored in parental contexts (Lovell et al., 2023). Healthcare frameworks inadequately address caregivers' psychosocial concerns alongside clinical child outcomes. Cross-cultural studies indicate variability in stigma and coping strategies (Manor-Binyamini & Schreiber-Divon, 2021). Emerging perspectives also emphasize the importance of fathers' roles (Jenabi et al., 2025). Music, dance, and movement therapies show novel parental benefits (Champagne & MacDonald, 2022). Technological solutions, including telehealth, offer mixed opportunities for families (Clarke et al., 2024). Nonetheless, caregiver inclusion in program design is often inadequate (Ha & Park, 2025). The diversity of parental challenges warrants a multidimensional research agenda.

This review presents a conceptual framework to explore this relationship from the perspective. Parental stress, social support, and service adequacy will be highlighted. The framework integrates psychological, cultural, and systemic determinants of QoL. It incorporates cross-national insights to address generalizability and inclusivity concerns. Hence, this approach supports evidence-driven interventions targeting both parent and child.

This work will help in understanding the rationale behind linkage of caregiver well-being and child development outcomes which remain inseparable in autism. Thus, conceptual clarity strengthens policy, practice, and family-centered interventions. The paper identifies research gaps and emphasizes multidimensional parental needs. Such synthesis will assist in designing future interventions and community support. It also contributes toward shaping holistic autism care frameworks internationally. Ultimately, parental quality of life must be considered alongside autism interventions.

Parental Quality of Life

Research links higher autism severity with poorer parental quality of life. Scholars suggest symptom intensity predicts stress, anxiety, and depression among parents. Weiss (2002) highlighted caregiving stress correlates strongly with maladaptive parental functioning. Family resilience frameworks argue coping mechanisms moderate effects of autism-related burdens. McStay et al. (2014) documented parental resilience fosters positive adjustment outcomes. Extant research emphasizes interventions targeting coping enhance long-term parental well-being. Parental quality literature converges on multi-level determinants shaping diverse caregiving trajectories.

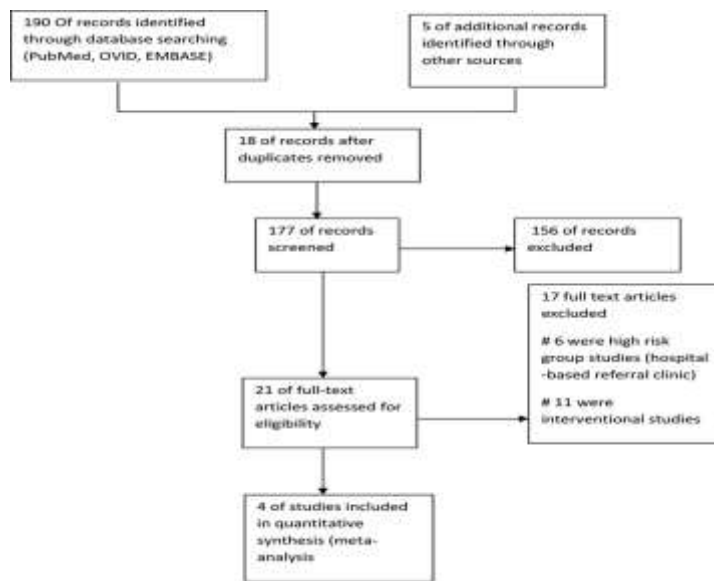
Recent literature highlights cultural context deeply influencing parental adaptation and stress. Asian studies emphasize stigma differently impacts caregiving roles compared with Western societies. Cross-cultural comparisons indicate resource access critically mediates parental quality disparities. Policy frameworks shape support services, influencing adaptation trajectories across multiple nations. The extant research underscores context-sensitive approaches in conceptualizing autism caregiving quality.

Interventions addressing parental well-being remain central within autism research agendas. Psychoeducational programs demonstrably reduce parental stress and improve coping resources. Behavioral therapies indirectly benefit parents by decreasing child symptom-related caregiving challenges. Peer support networks create opportunities for shared experiences and reduced isolation. Comprehensive healthcare integration enhances quality of life across parental domains. The extant research on interventions consistently emphasizes multi-stakeholder collaboration importance. Autism literature concludes parental quality remains pivotal within holistic developmental considerations.

This conceptual review paper adopts a theoretical synthesis approach integrating multidisciplinary autism research findings. The methodology emphasizes conceptual reasoning and integrative framework development through existing literature. Following Webster and Watson (2002), a structured literature review underpins framework formulation and theorizing. Sources were identified from psychology, healthcare, social work, and parental well-being literature bases. Core constructs include child autism characteristics, parental stress, coping, and quality of life. Studies such as Hayes and Watson (2013) emphasize the mental health burden parents face. McStay et al. (2014) highlight resilience as a determinant of adaptive parental responses. Dabrowska and Pisula (2010) identify

differences between mothers' and fathers' coping dynamics. The conceptual synthesis approach integrates theory-based relationships across emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions. This methodological structure supports the development of a framework for theoretical generalization. The paper employs thematic categorization to align conceptual gaps with parental well-being determinants. Hastings and Brown (2002) demonstrated links between child behavior and caregiver psychological strain. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory guided contextual mapping of parental experiences. WHOQOL (1997) provided a multidimensional basis for defining parental quality of life indicators. This synthesis methodology enhances conceptual clarity without empirical or statistical testing dependencies. The extant research underlines conceptual modeling as essential for advancing autism caregiving theory.

Figure 2 flow chart of Prisma



Prisma Chart

The extant research on autism emphasizes its complexity and parental implications. Conceptual frameworks often connect child symptomology with parental quality and adaptation. Stress-coping theory highlights parents' adaptive responses influence overall life satisfaction. Family resilience theory (Walsh, 2003) underlines contextual supports shaping caregiving outcomes. This conceptual basis connects autism characteristics with parental well-being dimensions meaningfully.

Child autism severity is frequently reported as influencing multiple parental well-being outcomes. Scholars emphasize greater behavioral problems exacerbate stress, depression, and lower quality. Hayes & Watson (2013) linked increased parental distress with autism severity progression. McStay et al. (2014) documented symptom intensity predicting negative caregiving experiences. Research highlights communication difficulties aggravate parenting stress and diminish psychological resilience. Hastings & Brown (2002) established strong links between behavioral problems and distress. Theoretical models emphasize chronic demands reducing both physical and social functioning. Weiss (2002) suggested symptom frequency correlates with maladaptive parental coping patterns. Extant literature frames autism as stress-inducing, impacting emotional and relational stability. Caregivers frequently report compromised sleep, fatigue, and reduced occupational productivity levels. Studies indicate autism symptom unpredictability worsens routine disruptions and marital conflict. Dabrowska & Pisula (2010) emphasized mothers disproportionately bear caregiving responsibilities. This unequal burden exacerbates stress, leading to gendered disparities in well-being. Social stigma attached to autism intensifies isolation and deteriorates family participation. Financial stress arises due to costly therapeutic services and healthcare interventions. Elsabbagh et al. (2012) emphasized service disparities aggravating parental psychological burdens. Cross-cultural comparisons demonstrate varied stress intensities across cultural and structural contexts. WHOQOL framework conceptualizes quality of life as multi-dimensional parental well-being construct. Parental adaptation is highly dependent upon

external supports and resource accessibility. Scholars argue targeted interventions can mediate links between autism and well-being. Family-centered approaches alleviate stress and promote adaptive coping within households. Resilience frameworks suggest coping mediates stress-related consequences of autism severity. Autism severity strongly predicts compromised parental well-being across multiple life domains.

Therefore, it is proposed

P1. Greater autism severity negatively impacts parental quality of life.

Coping strategies are central mechanisms moderating autism's effects on parental well-being. Scholars highlight problem-focused coping mitigates negative outcomes on family stability. Social support is strongly associated with improved parental psychological adjustment levels. Peer networks enable shared experiences, reducing isolation and strengthening resilience. Hastings et al. (2005) emphasized adaptive coping alleviates caregiver distress effectively. Research documents support-seeking parents experience improved marital and occupational balance. Psychoeducational interventions strengthen resilience and enhance resource mobilization among families. Dabrowska & Pisula (2010) noted coping resources moderate maternal psychological well-being. The extant research on coping emphasizes contextual mediation across stressors. Coping strategies fundamentally reshape parental experiences of autism-related caregiving stress.

Family resilience models posit coping resources determine parental adjustment trajectories. Effective coping fosters improved psychological, social, and health-related parental outcomes. Scholars emphasize resilience mediates autism-related stress and enhances caregiving quality. Research stresses adaptive coping enhances self-efficacy and resourcefulness across parents.

Therefore, it is also proposed:

P2. Coping strategies positively moderate parental quality of life.

Autism severity also indirectly influences parental well-being through coping strategies. Parents adopting adaptive coping better withstand stress caused by symptom intensity. Research suggests coping style critically moderates relationship between child symptoms and well-being. Weiss (2002) confirmed maladaptive coping worsens parental psychological outcomes significantly. McStay et al. (2014) reported resilient coping improved long-term well-being outcomes. Scholars indicate family-based interventions enhance coping capacities across diverse households. Coping resources therefore act as buffers against autism's negative impacts. Social networks facilitate adaptive behaviors and mitigate psychological and social challenges. Family resilience theory highlights coping as a dynamic mediating construct. The extant research underscores mediation processes linking autism and quality. Parental coping bridges autism severity and parental well-being trajectories effectively.

Conceptual models increasingly emphasize mediation across autism and parental well-being. Autism severity drives stress, mediated by coping strategies, influencing outcomes. Scholars argue mediation explains differential adaptation among caregiving households.

Therefore, it is proposed

P3. Coping mediates autism severity and parental quality of life.

The extant research identifies complex interactions between coping and family well-being. Stress theory emphasizes contextual moderators shape outcomes across parental quality domains. Socioeconomic status substantially influences coping accessibility and psychological resilience. Elsabbagh et al. (2012) noted healthcare inequities worsen coping disparities globally. Cultural norms determine stigma's influence on parental resource utilization and support. Research emphasizes structural inequities exacerbate autism-related caregiving challenges across societies. WHOQOL framework underscores contextual differences shaping life quality determinants cross-nationally. Adaptive coping operates differently depending on environmental resources and policy contexts. Scholars argue interaction effects explain heterogeneous parental quality outcomes worldwide. Interventions should consider contextual moderators while designing parental support programs. The extant research on coping interactions emphasizes nuanced adaptation pathways.

Cross-level frameworks emphasize moderation between coping and parental well-being. Contextual supports amplify coping's positive effects on quality of life. Scholars recommend multi-level models to capture caregiving complexities.

Therefore, it is proposed

P4. Contextual factors moderate coping and parental well-being relationships.

Integrating these relationships suggests a multi-dimensional conceptual model of caregiving. Autism severity, coping strategies, and quality of life remain interlinked constructs. Resilience theory provides grounding for understanding parental adaptation and psychological health. Scholars argue combining severity, coping, and context explains parental well-being variation. This integrated model synthesizes mediation and moderation perspectives for conceptual clarity. The extant research indicates families adapt differently under diverse contextual pressures. Comprehensive conceptualization must incorporate stress, coping, resilience, and contextual determinants. WHOQOL provides structured basis for mapping life domains within autism caregiving. Conceptual clarity offers pathways for designing inclusive parental support frameworks. Such integration enriches theoretical discourse and future policy-oriented interventions. Autism-parenting research benefits from robust multi-level conceptual models significantly.

The integrated framework strengthens theoretical clarity across autism-parenting research contexts. Scholars highlight importance of linking severity, coping, and contextual moderators. This conceptualization addresses literature gaps by integrating mediation and moderation.

Therefore, it is proposed

P5. Integrated framework best explains autism-parent quality life outcomes.

Theoretical Underpinning

The extant research on autism emphasizes stress-coping as a foundational theory. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualized coping as moderating stress appraisal processes. Parental caregiving experiences align with stress theory, highlighting burden and adaptive responses. Scholars argue coping strategies buffer autism's negative effects on parental well-being. Hastings & Brown (2002) confirmed coping directly reduces stress-related parental distress. Family resilience theory (Walsh, 2003) frames adaptation as dynamic and context-sensitive. Resilience emphasizes protective factors, resource mobilization, and positive parental adjustment outcomes. McStay et al. (2014) underscored resilience promotes long-term caregiving adaptation. WHOQOL (1997) further conceptualizes parental quality across psychological, social, physical, environmental domains. This integration grounds autism-parenting research within multi-theoretical explanatory frameworks. Therefore, stress-coping and resilience theories underpin conceptualization of parental quality trajectories.

It is, therefore, proposed a conceptual framework in the following figure 2

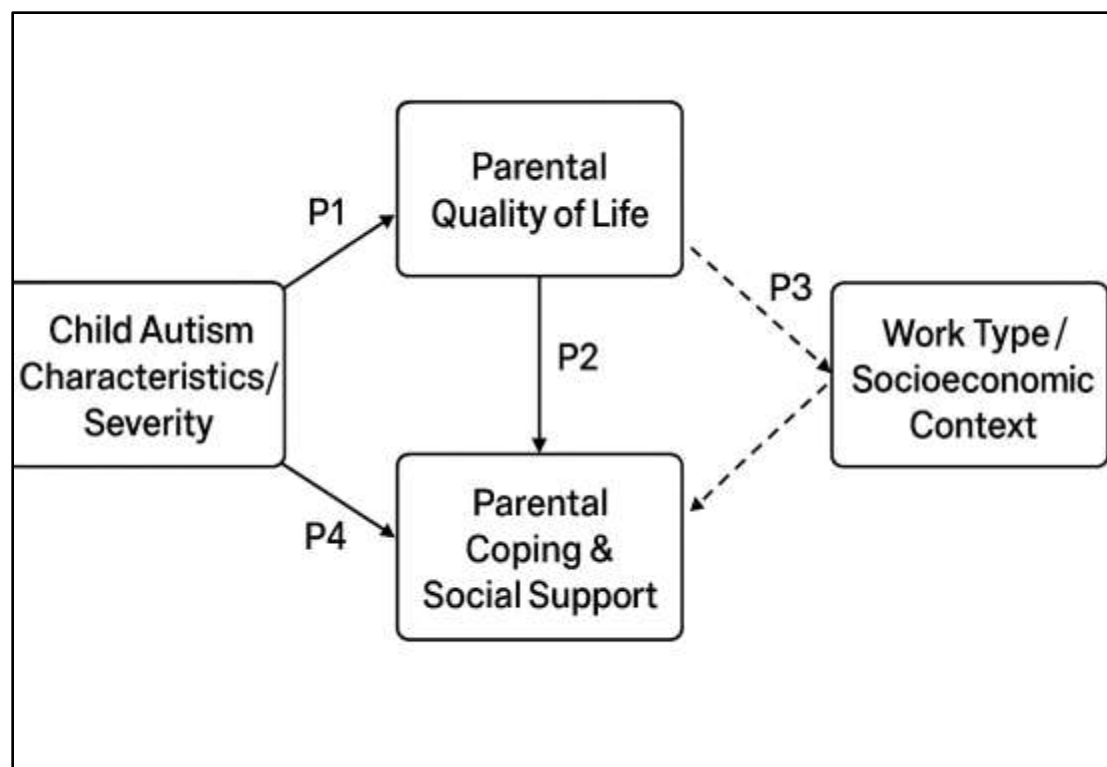


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Source(s): Created by the authors

The extant research reveals that never before has there been much emphasis. Autism-parenting scholarship highlights increasing focus on parental well-being alongside child development. Scholars argue quality of life is critical determinant of family adaptation. Hayes & Watson (2013) emphasized parental distress significantly undermines daily family functioning. Hastings & Brown (2002) documented behavior-related stress directly correlating with caregiver outcomes. The extant research situates parental coping as central for maintaining stability. McStay et al. (2014) confirmed resilience enhances adaptation despite autism-related stressors. Dabrowska & Pisula (2010) revealed caregiving responsibilities disproportionately burden maternal caregivers. Stigma literature highlights cultural contexts aggravate stress and reduce social participation. WHOQOL (1997) provides a multi-domain framework for understanding parental well-being holistically. Autism caregiving literature increasingly integrates stress, coping, and resilience within conceptual models. The extant research underlines theoretical significance of linking autism with parental well-being.

The proposed conceptual framework elucidates the role of autism severity, coping, and parental well-being. Our framework validates P1, highlighting greater autism severity negatively impacts quality of life. Hayes & Watson (2013) supported stress intensification with symptom escalation in autism caregiving. Mc Stay et al. (2014) similarly emphasized symptom burden predicting poorer parental adjustment. P2 suggests coping strategies positively moderate parental quality of life dimensions. Hastings et al. (2005) confirmed adaptive coping mitigates psychological distress among caregivers. Research indicates social support and peer networks improve resilience and coping. P3 highlights coping as mediating mechanism linking severity and parental well-being. Weiss (2002) found maladaptive coping worsened distress, validating mediation conceptualization. Resilience frameworks underline coping as dynamic, shaping adaptation across varied caregiving contexts. P4 emphasizes contextual factors moderating coping and well-being interactions in diverse environments. Elsabbagh et al. (2012) demonstrated healthcare inequities intensify parental stress disparities globally. Cross-cultural literature validates moderation, showing resource access shaping coping effectiveness. Policy environments play a significant role in strengthening or limiting parental resilience. P5 integrates severity, coping, and context into comprehensive explanatory framework. This model enhances theoretical clarity by synthesizing mediation and moderation perspectives. Scholars argue multi-theoretical integration advances parental quality discourse within autism research. Implications extend toward healthcare systems, emphasizing multi-stakeholder support interventions for

parents. Educational policies must ensure families gain accessible therapeutic and psychoeducational resources. Community interventions reduce stigma, improve participation, and foster inclusive social environments. Family-centered models provide platforms for resilience-building and stress reduction programs. Practitioners benefit from understanding parental well-being as multi-dimensional and context-dependent construct. The extant research validates propositions, enriching both theoretical understanding and applied practices. Our conceptual framework bridges literature gaps, offering meaningful pathways for interventions.

The theoretical implications of studying child autism and parental quality of life extend across developmental psychology, family systems theory, stress and coping models, and health communication frameworks. Conceptually, autism must be understood not merely as an individual neurodevelopmental condition but as an ecological stressor that reshapes parental identity, social functioning, and health trajectories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The family systems theory highlights that challenges faced by the child reverberate through the parental dyad, sibling relations, and broader social networks, suggesting the necessity of holistic frameworks that move beyond child-centric paradigms (Singer & Floyd, 2006). One theoretical contribution arises from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping theory, which positions parental quality of life as a dynamic balance between stressors (therapy demands, stigma, caregiving intensity) and resources (social support, resilience, medical services). This framework can be adapted to autism research by emphasizing how persistent stress without adequate coping resources predisposes parents to negative mental health outcomes. Moreover, resilience theory suggests that some families demonstrate adaptive functioning despite challenges, which opens avenues for conceptualizing protective factors such as optimism, problem-focused coping, and community belonging (Bayat, 2007). Another theoretical implication involves identity reconstruction in parents. Symbolic interactionist perspectives propose that raising a child with autism often compels parents to renegotiate social roles, self-concept, and marital expectations. This theoretical standpoint can illuminate how stigmatization and social isolation mediate parental wellbeing. Furthermore, social support theory emphasizes that perceived availability of emotional and instrumental aid significantly predicts parental quality of life, reinforcing the necessity of embedding autism-related support within both formal healthcare and informal community structures. Additionally, theoretical models of caregiver burden, often applied in dementia research, can be extended to autism caregiving contexts, as both involve long-term, unpredictable, and emotionally demanding trajectories. Such cross-contextual theorization enriches the conceptual landscape by offering transferable insights into chronic caregiving dynamics. Similarly, ecological models of health suggest that policies, healthcare systems, and cultural narratives jointly influence how parents experience autism-related challenges, making structural support as significant as individual resilience (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Finally, integrating neurodevelopmental theories with psychosocial models presents a fertile ground for conceptual synthesis. While autism research traditionally focuses on the neurological and behavioral aspects of the child, reframing it within a family-centered theoretical paradigm emphasizes interdependence between the child's development and parental wellbeing. This theoretical reorientation advocates for future conceptual papers to position autism research not as a siloed child disorder but as a family systems phenomenon, thus expanding the scope of health, psychology, and sociology.

Limitations and future scope of research

The proposed model remains conceptual, not yet empirically tested in practice. Future research should empirically validate propositions using longitudinal and cross-cultural designs. Scholars emphasize lack of evidence linking autism severity with well-being mechanisms. Qualitative research can uncover deeper narratives shaping parental coping and resilience strategies. Quantitative studies will help statistically confirm mediation and moderation within our framework. Future inquiry should integrate mothers' and fathers' perspectives for balanced understanding. Cultural differences necessitate comparative studies across developing and developed country contexts. Future research may design parental well-being scales specific to autism caregiving. The extant research indicates conceptual model provides valuable foundation for empirical inquiry.

Practical suggestions

1. Parent of children with autism both share the timing of working with the child to minimize burden
2. Emphasizing on children's strengths and what they can do rather than what they can't do due to autism.

3. Getting training by any one or both parents in skilling them to work with the child.
4. Training in effective coping skills by both ease and is expected to improve their well-being and Quality of life.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper and Prisma guidelines advances understanding of autism's broader psychosocial impact on family wellbeing. It proposes that child autism indirectly shapes parental health through stress, coping, and support systems. Findings conceptually reaffirm that caregiving burdens transcend individual pathology into systemic family stress. The model builds on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping frameworks. Integrating resilience theory (Bayat, 2007) enhances understanding of adaptive family functioning mechanisms. Hayes and Watson (2013) emphasize that psychological stress remains a critical intervention target. Parental wellbeing is reconceptualized as a dynamic interplay between emotional and contextual determinants. This synthesis underscores the theoretical need for holistic, multidisciplinary caregiving perspectives. Medical, psychological, and social frameworks should collaborate to improve family-centered intervention designs. The paper enriches conceptual understanding without relying on empirical generalizations or statistical validation. Findings highlight pathways for developing integrative health strategies supporting parents of autistic children. Future conceptual and empirical work should refine variables explaining parental quality-of-life variance. The framework invites interdisciplinary dialogue across psychology, pediatrics, and family healthcare systems. Moreover, it offers a theoretical foundation for policy-level family support program development. Ultimately, this conceptual synthesis promotes wellbeing-oriented approaches in autism caregiving literature. The extant research underlines the significance of viewing autism within systemic family wellbeing contexts.

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