

PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES EXPERIENCED BY THE PARENTS OF SPECIAL CHILDREN IN GUJRANWALA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Families' mental, social, and financial well-being are greatly impacted by the difficult and emotionally taxing experience of raising a child with special needs. This qualitative study investigates the various difficulties these parents encounter through the eyes of qualified psychologists who collaborate closely with them. The results show systemic delays in intervention, social stigma and isolation, deep emotional struggles like denial, anxiety, and emotional burnout, as well as the strains of caregiving and financial obligations. To put the data in context, the study makes use of pertinent psychological frameworks like Bowen's Family Systems Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory. The findings highlight the There is an urgent need for inclusive policies, thorough mental health support, early diagnosis, and increased public awareness. In addition to being crucial for their own wellbeing, empowering parents via support networks also has a major positive impact on the growth and upbringing of children with special needs.

INTRODUCTION

Many people say that having children is a life-altering experience that is full of love, happiness, and a sense of purpose. Every little victory feels like a celebration along the way, and every sacrifice takes on new significance. However, if a child is born with a disability, Parenting takes a different route for people with disabilities, regardless of whether they impact their behavior, learning, emotional health, or physical abilities. Even though there is still love and bonding along the way, this journey gets much more difficult and emotionally complex. Parents of children with disabilities frequently have to live in a state of perpetual alertness, adapting every aspect of their lives to suit the special requirements of their child. simple activities that most parents might think of as simple,

like taking a family vacation, going to school events, or going for a walk, can become complicated duties requiring medical attention, specialized equipment, or techniques for managing behavior.

It is difficult to put into words the emotional weight of this experience. Many parents experience anxiety, a sense of powerlessness, and intense worry about the future of their child. They might be preoccupied with concerns about their child's social acceptance, whether they'll ever become self-sufficient, or what will happen to them in the event that their parents pass away. These parents frequently experience social isolation, not because they wish to withdraw but rather because others may not comprehend their child's needs or behavior. Public places seem

inhospitable, invitations become infrequent, and strangers' critical looks can make even a straightforward outing feel overwhelming. Furthermore, as parents suppress their own mental and emotional needs in an effort to be strong for their kids, the emotional load is frequently carried in silence.

Another significant challenge is financial strain. Additional resources, such as regular doctor's appointments, therapies, special education, transportation, and adaptive equipment, are frequently needed when raising a child with special needs. Public support systems frequently do not cover these. Families are left to bear the expenses alone. One parent must quit their job to take care of the family full-time in many households, which lowers income and increases financial stress. This has an impact on the family's long-term security in addition to their current stability.

Many parents feel ignored by the government, healthcare, and educational systems that are meant to support them, despite their unwavering efforts. Frequently, these Systems don't have the resources, adaptability, or sensitivity required to properly accommodate kids with disabilities. Families who are already overburdened are made even more irate by lengthy waiting lists, a lack of services, and undertrained employees. Furthermore, societal perceptions continue to be a significant obstacle. In addition to discriminating against the child, stigma, stereotypes, and ignorance frequently result in the parents being blamed, condemned, or pitied.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the profound and frequently unseen difficulties that parents of disabled children encounter in all facets of life, not only when providing care. By examining This essay aims to give voice to their experiences with financial hardship, social exclusion, and emotional struggles. It also emphasizes how urgently society's perceptions, attitudes, and responses to disability need to change. In the end, it urges a more sympathetic, inclusive strategy—one that unites families, professionals, educators, and legislators to build a society in which all parents are supported, respected, and empowered, and all children, regardless of ability, are valued.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Age range: 27–40
2. A psychologist with at least two years of experience who is licensed or in practice
3. Have firsthand knowledge of parents of special needs children
4. Being prepared to consent and take part
5. Able to communicate in English, Urdu, or

Exclusion Criteria

1. Less than 27 or 40 years old
2. Not licensed or practicing at the moment
3. Lack of familiarity with parents of special children
4. Having a personal interest in a special child (to prevent prejudice)
5. Barriers to communication or language

Rationale of study

Every parent of a child with special needs bears the burden of the world in silence. Along with love, their days are also characterized by weariness, anxiety, and the ongoing stress of providing for their child's special needs. Although the world may witness their power, few genuinely comprehend the emotional toll that it takes to maintain patience, fight for services, and maintain a positive attitude under pressure. To ensure that their child has what they need, these parents frequently put their own lives, aspirations, and even mental health on hold. And in spite of everything, they hardly ever get the credit, encouragement, or attention they merit.

This explains why this subject seems so significant on an emotional, social, and academic level. These parents are frequently left to fend for themselves in places like Pakistan, where there are few awareness and support networks. The majority of research aims to assist the child, which is crucial, but it's also critical to consider: Who is assisting the parent? Giving them a voice starts with this study. It seeks to raise awareness of the struggles they face on a daily basis and to initiate discussions that result in improvements to laws, support networks, and empathy. Because when we look after the parents, we are also providing loving care for the children they look after.

Literature review

Farzana Ashraf (2021) states that the emotional rollercoaster that parents of children with special needs experience is poignantly depicted in Farzana Ashraf's 2021 research. She highlights the significant impact that ongoing caregiving, financial strain, and the weight of social criticism can have on their mental health, particularly mothers' mental health. The uncertainty of everyday life frequently leaves these parents feeling emotionally spent and overburdened. What is noteworthy, though, is their resilience in the face of difficulty. While some rely on strong family bonds and problem-solving techniques to get through difficult times, many turn to faith, prayer, and inner spirituality for solace. Ashraf's work serves as a gentle reminder that these parents require more than just medical or educational assistance; they also require emotional support, community awareness, and easily accessible mental health resources.

Moreover Temitope Aroyewun (2024) says that everyday battles parents of special needs children quietly fight—often with little help or recognition. From emotional exhaustion and limited access to health services to social isolation and financial hardships, the challenges are many. But despite all this, many parents remain deeply hopeful about their child's future. They hold on to the belief that, with the right support, their children can grow, learn, and thrive. Aroyewun beautifully highlights not just their struggles, but also their unwavering love and patience. She stresses the need for more inclusive schools, community awareness, and support systems that not only focus on the child but empower the entire family. It's a call to create a world where parents don't feel so alone in their journey.

Indian Journal of Community Health (2018) highlights the tremendous amount of stress they deal with on a daily basis, from dealing with challenging behaviors to fighting financial strains and a lack of expert assistance. Many parents experience a sense of social isolation, partly as a result of stigma but also as a result of others' lack of compassion and understanding. The study highlights the emotional isolation that these families experience and emphasizes the necessity of inclusive policies, caregiver training, and public awareness campaigns. The study's message—that these parents are burdened, not broken, and that they can manage much better

with the correct resources and community support—is what makes it so compelling.

A Punjab University study from 2023 makes a strong link between the negative effects on mental health and the stress of raising a child with special needs. It demonstrates how parents, particularly those raising kids with autism or other multiple disabilities, frequently suffer from severe burnout, depression, and anxiety. Their role's emotional burden can permeate every aspect of their lives, including relationships and the workplace. It's remarkable how frequently these psychological issues go unrecognized because parents are too preoccupied with attending to their children's needs. The study urges immediate action because families require more than just therapy sessions or doctor's appointments for their children; they also require emotional support, access to qualified mental health specialists, and resources to help them take care of themselves.

The Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences article from 2022 discusses the unsaid challenges faced by parents of children with intellectual disabilities or developmental delays like autism. These parents frequently bear the emotional weight of their children's actions, difficulties, delayed diagnoses, and ongoing concerns about the future. Stress can become unbearable for families with limited financial means or little social support. However, the study's findings offer promise and hope: community awareness, peer support groups, and early intervention can truly make a difference. It exhorts us to view these parents as heroes who deserve compassion, organized assistance, and recognition for the tireless work they do every day.

Theoretical framework

The Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) according to this theory, parents experience stress when the demands of caregiving become too much for them to handle. It focuses on how they evaluate difficulties and employ coping mechanisms like looking for stress management techniques like counseling, emotional acceptance, or support networks.

The Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) this theory demonstrates how a parent's experience is influenced by various facets of their environment, including family, healthcare, society, and culture. It clarifies how cultural attitudes, a lack

of support, and social stigma make parenting more emotionally and practically taxing.

The Theory of Family Systems (Bowen, 1974) according to this theory, a family is an emotional unit in which the needs or stress of one member impacts the system as a whole. A child's disability causes emotional, monetary, and tension in relationships throughout the whole family. As they attempt to keep things in balance, parents may feel guilty, anxious, and worn out. The theory explains how family blame, emotional exhaustion, and a lack of shared caregiving can occur.

Methodology

The emotional, social, and practical difficulties faced by parents of children with special needs were investigated in this study using a qualitative research design and a thematic analysis approach. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data.

Sampling Technique

Participants who satisfied the inclusion requirements—psychologists between the ages of 27 and 40 who were actively working and had prior experience working with parents of special needs—were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. To minimize bias and maintain objectivity, psychologists without a license, without experience in

this field, or who were also parents of children with special needs were not allowed to participate.

Data collection

Depending on participant preference, interviews were held in both English and Urdu. After being transcribed, the responses underwent thematic analysis. A codebook was created. The main themes and subthemes, including emotional burnout, delayed intervention, family neglect, financial stress, and therapy challenges, were derived from recurrent responses.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the interview, each participant gave their informed consent. Throughout the entire research process, confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously upheld.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were subjected to a methodical coding procedure. The six-step thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to group codes into meaningful categories and then further refine them into major themes and subthemes. For dependability, cross-validation amongst coders was guaranteed.

Results

Table 1

Emergent themes after thematic analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Supporting Code (Key Idea)	Participant
Emotional Challenges	Denial and Shock	Denial after diagnosis, Emotional shock	1, 4
	Anxiety and Depression	Hope loss from delay, Guilt and helplessness	2, 3
	Emotional Burnout	Mother emotional burden, Emotional burnout	1, 4
	Fear and Helplessness	Fear of future, Social judgment anxiety	3
Delayed Intervention	Missed Early Signs	Avoiding early signs, Missed developmental window, Missed early signs	4
	Diagnosis Delays	Missed diagnosis window, Late diagnosis harm	2
	Generalist Misguidance	Generalist misguidance	2
Parental Burden	Sole Responsibility	No shared caregiving, Sole caregiving burden	1, 2
	Family Neglect or Blame	Lack family support, Blame from relatives	1, 3
	Routine and Exhaustion	Routine therapy stress, financial exhaustion, Financial and schedule strain	1, 3, 4
Social and Cultural Pressures	Social Stigma	Social stigma, Public embarrassment	1, 4
	Societal Misunderstanding	Society ignorance, Social misconception	1, 3
	Isolation & Peer Pressure	Emotional isolation, Peer comparison stress	1, 4
Child's Behavioral Issues	Aggression & Rigidity	Aggression and meltdowns, Rigid behaviors, Severe aggression	2, 3
	Self-Injurious Behavior	Self-injury behavior, Behavioral frustration	3, 4
Cognitive & Therapy Factors	Therapy Challenges	Therapist shortage, Late therapy barrier	3, 4
	Acceptance Journey	Role of acceptance, Acceptance first step	1, 2
	Psychoeducation & Support	Therapist psychoeducation, Asking for help	1, 4
	Confidence and Guidance	Emotional guidance, Parent confidence boost	3
Technology and Development	Screen Time Issues	Gadget overuse effect, Screen use impact, Screen time reduction	2, 3, 4
	Missed Milestones	Missed milestones, Unrealistic expectations	2, 1
	Weak Bonding & Play Deficit	Weak bonding, Outdoor play deficit	4, 3
Coping and Recovery	Support Systems	Support group value, Counseling and coping	2, 4
	Self-Care Practices	Routine and self-care, Importance of self-care	2, 4

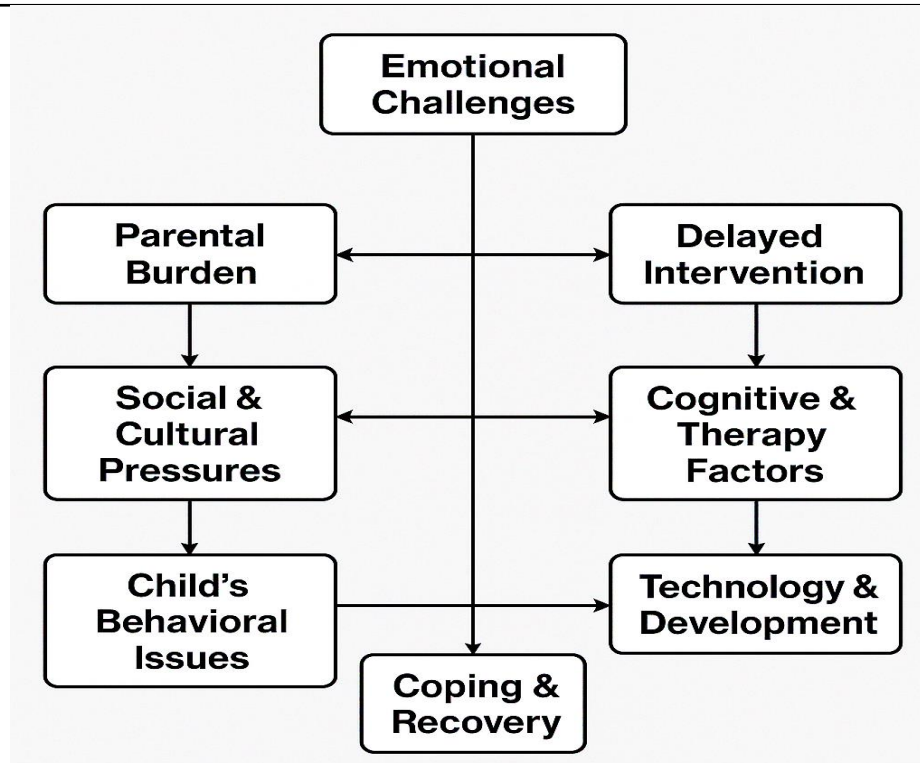


Figure 1
Thematic Map

DISCUSSION

Talk about how raising a child with special needs brings about a drastically different life path that is filled with love but also entwined with emotional pain, social rejection, financial hardships, and continuous ambiguity. In order to give voice and visibility to those who bear this silent burden on a daily basis, this study used a qualitative approach to examine the complex experiences of such parents.

Prior studies have consistently highlighted the psychological stress that these parents endure. Among other authors, Farzana Ashraf (2021) and Temitope Aroyewun (2024) emphasized the profound effects that financial strain, social stigma, and emotional exhaustion have on caregivers, especially mothers. These studies provide the context for comprehending how theoretical frameworks such as Bowen's Family Systems Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, and Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory are implemented in actual encounters. Each of these frameworks contributes to the understanding of how stress arises and manifests, the role that culture and

systems play, and how family dynamics change when caregiving becomes a continuous responsibility.

Experienced psychologists who work closely with parents of children with special needs provided the data. A variety of practical and emotional difficulties were found by using a thematic analysis of the interviews. Denial, shock, anxiety, depression, and emotional burnout were frequently cited as the most prevalent emotional difficulties. Intervention was delayed at first because many parents found it difficult to accept the diagnosis. Missed therapy opportunities during crucial developmental windows were frequently the result of this emotional denial. Depression was often associated with feelings of loneliness and powerlessness, whereas anxiety was often associated with uncertainty about the future.

Another big worry was delayed intervention. According to participants, a large number of parents were unable to recognize early indicators of disability, frequently as a result of general healthcare providers' ignorance or inadequate advice. This supports earlier research and demonstrates that diagnostic Delays can make treatment less effective and cause more stress for

caregivers. One common setback was the lack of expert advice, particularly in the beginning. One important theme that surfaced was parental burden. Due to unequal responsibility sharing between spouses or a lack of family support, many parents were left to care for their children alone. The psychological and physical consequences of handling therapy alone, daily care, behavior control, and appointments were significant. Participants also related experiences where parents' stress and emotional exhaustion were exacerbated by extended family members criticizing or blaming them for their child's behavior.

The parents' difficulties were exacerbated by social and cultural forces. Public embarrassment, social misunderstanding, and stigma were prevalent, particularly in environments with low disability awareness. Emotional isolation resulted from many parents avoiding public events out of fear of criticism or embarrassment. These incidents support Bronfenbrenner's theory and demonstrate how larger social structures can either reinforce or undermine family coping strategies. Parental emotional and physical exhaustion was mentioned in relation to child behavioral issues, specifically aggression, rigidity, and self-harming behavior. Participants described how parental anxiety and burnout increased as a result of these behaviors, which needed ongoing observation and intervention. In certain instances, the child's actions also led to disruptions in routines or rifts in family relationships.

Issues pertaining to therapy, like a lack of psychoeducation, subpar services, and a shortage of professionals, were also frequently mentioned. However, some parents found solace in therapy or encouraging therapists who gave them emotional support and increased their self-assurance. These constructive exchanges demonstrated the effectiveness of professional empathy and emotional support in lowering stress. Another recurrent theme was technology and how it affects development. Reports of excessive screen time, missed developmental milestones, and poor bonding as a result of gadget dependence were common. Parents voiced their worries about excessive device use. had a detrimental effect on their child's conduct and social abilities, which exacerbated feelings of inferiority and guilt.

Many parents showed incredible resilience by using coping mechanisms in spite of these adversities. Burnout was lessened by support groups, therapy, and self-care techniques like emotional expression, structured routines, and mindfulness. Since parents who used active coping strategies had better psychological health than those who lacked social or emotional support, these findings are in line with Lazarus and Folkman's theory. The findings provide compelling evidence that the structural constraints of society and healthcare systems are closely related to the practical and emotional difficulties faced by parents. Participants' experiences are well-framed by the theories employed in this study: Caregivers are frequently overworked, emotionally distant, and routinely neglected. However, many of these difficulties can be lessened with prompt action, expert advice, and social empathy.

This study has certain limitations. The results might not have the same level of first-hand emotional intensity as first-hand accounts because the data was gathered from psychologists rather than parents. To further enhance the data, future research should include in-person interviews with parents from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and disability types. However, this study highlights that every unique child has a parent who is silently dealing with emotional stress, systemic neglect, and social misunderstanding. It is critical to acknowledge, assist, and empower these parents not just for their personal welfare. but for their kids' benefit. The developmental results for special children also improve when caregivers receive practical, social, and emotional support. Moving from silence to support and from sympathy to empathy as a society is not only morally required, but also a critical step toward compassionate, inclusive advancement.

Conclusion

The emotional, social, and financial challenges that parents of children with special needs face are highlighted in this study. Their stress is largely caused by denial, delayed intervention, stigma, and a lack of support networks. The results highlight the necessity of early diagnosis, mental health support, family participation, and inclusive policies. The study highlights the critical need to support both the caregiver and the child, even though it is based on professional insights. A more compassionate,

inclusive society is created when parents are empowered, and better results are achieved for the whole family.

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APPENDICES

Questionnaire

- Q1: What are some of the most common emotional challenges that parents of special children face?
- Q2: How does denial impact early intervention and treatment outcomes?
- Q3: What role does family support play in helping parents manage stress?
- Q4: How do therapists support or counsel parents who are emotionally struggling?
- Q5: What are some of the practical challenges parents face in long-term therapy?
- Q6: How does lack of awareness in society contribute to these parental challenges?
- Q7: How do modern lifestyle factors (like gadget use or lack of outdoor play) worsen the situation?
- Q8: What kinds of behavioral challenges in children increase parental stress?
- Q9: What strategies or advice do you give parents to help them cope better?

