

## ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN ADDRESSING TRANSITIONAL ISSUES AMONG AUTISTIC ADOLESCENTS: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17578978>

### Keywords

Community, Parents, Schools,  
Professional, Collaboration

### Article History

Received: 19 September 2025

Accepted: 30 October 2025

Published: 11 November 2025

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### Abstract

The present study was conducted to explore the role of the community in addressing the transitional issues among autistic adolescents. Data was collected from parents of autistic adolescents as well as from mental health professionals. Data was collected by using a structured interview protocol. Brown and Clarke (2006) approach was used to for qualitative data analysis. It was found that three major stakeholders, including parents, schools and mental health professionals can collaboratively work for addressing transitional issues among autistic adolescents. The collaboration among these three stakeholders is the key in achieving desirable outcomes. A positive and welcoming attitude from every member of the community can be very beneficial for effective transition. Transition readiness should be the part of individualized education plans (IEPs) and all stakeholders should be included in the formation of IEPs. Our paper highlights the importance of collaboration among parents, schools and mental health professionals for making the transition easy and comfortable and it will also promote inclusion in our society.

### INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder is under studied in Asian countries (Sun et al., 2016). In Pakistan due to a lack of awareness and education about autism, there are no reliable published data about the prevalence of autism. However, according to statistics provided by the Autism Society of Pakistan, autism is prevalent in 2 out of 350,000 children but the actual prevalence is believed to be much higher. Many children with autism are not properly diagnosed due to the lack of awareness, medical services, and the shame attached with mental health conditions in our country (Fatima et al., 2021).

Transition is a continuous process and it happens everywhere. People change their workplaces and their living places. Even transition occur naturally as we enter adolescence from childhood and so on. Although every one of us experiences transition throughout our life span but every one of us responds differently towards the transitional phases. Some of us view transition as very complicated and challenging. Transition is even more complicated and challenging for those having autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Uncertainty about the future, fixed thinking patterns, and distorted cognitive patterns make the transition of ASD adolescents more difficult.

So it is the need of time to design evidence-based interventions for intensive care and support for ASD adolescents struggling with transitional difficulties (Simen, 2019).

Teacher and parents both play very important role in transition facilitation of ASD children so there need to be strong communication and understanding between teachers and parents for successful transition but unfortunately this is missing in most of the special need service delivery systems (Nuske et al., 2018). A research study conducted by Quintero and McIntyre, (2011) on teachers and parents revealed that although teachers are well aware of the fact that autistic children' transition is more challenging than the transition of other disabilities but there is no special resources to meet the intense needs of autistic children' transitional issues. Even where teachers and parents are highly active in planning of the transition still there is no individualized or personalized transition readiness program available (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Teachers are not given proper training to customized transition readiness programs for autistic children (Nuske et al., 2018).

A study conducted by Chen et al. (2020) explored the perceptive of teachers, parents and early intervention professionals and highlighted the importance of personalized or tailored transition readiness programs for autistic children. Findings of their study emphasized the need of collaborative interactions between parents, teachers and early intervention professionals for the development of holistic strength based approach for transition planning and facilitation.

**Objective:**

To explore the role of the community in addressing the transitional issues among autistic adolescents.

**Sample**

Purposive sampling was the method employed by the researcher to select the participant sample. This type of sampling is mostly strategic, meaning that it is necessary to make an effort to ensure that the research objectives and the sampling are well aligned (Bryman, 2004). Data was collected from

11 mental health professionals and 15 (80% of mothers and 20% of fathers) parents.

**INSTRUMENT**

Following instruments were used in the current study.

**Consent Form**

Mental health professionals and parents were requested to sign inform consent form which ensured that participants were aware of the goals, methods, possible hazards, and advantages of the study.

**Demographic Sheet**

Demographic data sheet was designed to gather the basic information about the mental health professionals and parents including age, gender and years of experience etc.

**Interview Guide**

Interview guideline was developed to gather qualitative data. Literature was consulted for developing interview protocol. Interview protocol was made psychometrically sound by evaluating its face validity, content validity and inter-rater reliability.

**Inclusion Criteria & Exclusion Criteria**

- Mental health professionals, notably psychologists, having first-hand experience working with children with autism spectrum disorders, in Rawalpindi-Islamabad were included in the current study.
- Mental health professionals with the minimum experience of 5 years were included in the current study.
- Parents who were willing to participate were including in the current study.

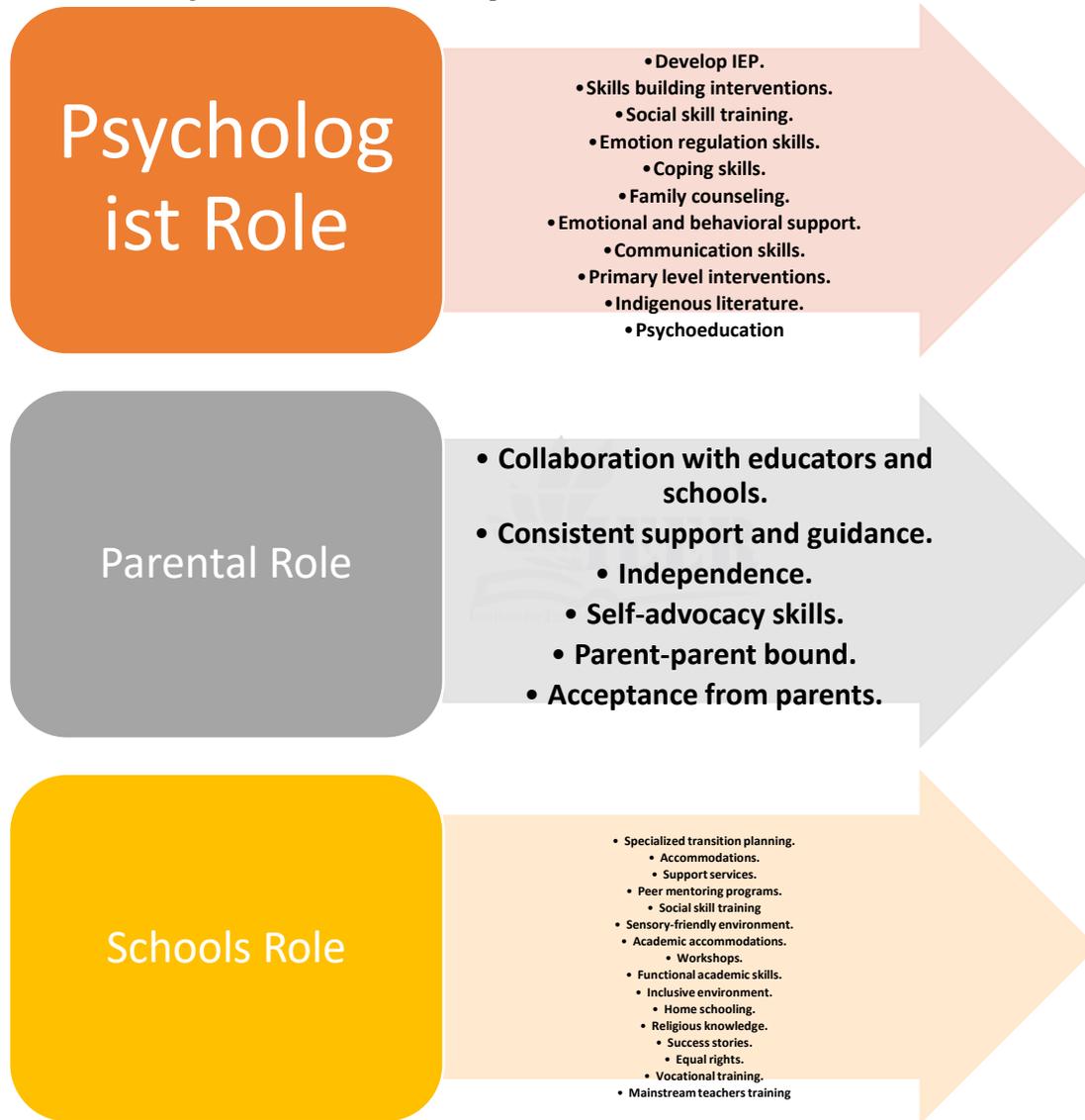
Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes, allowing for a thorough examination of their experiences, problems, and gratifications. All interviews were audio recorded to accurately capture the core of these talks, ensuring the preservation of delicate information and facilitating a full analysis during the succeeding phases of the research (Babbie, 2016).

**Data Analysis Procedure**

Thematic analysis was used in the data analysis process, and there are certain procedures that help the researcher make sense of the data set (Creswell, 2014). Terry et al. (2019) define thematic analysis as a data analysis technique that identifies the key themes in a qualitative data collection. The thematic analysis was carried out by the researchers using Braun and Clarke's six-phased

analytic process (Terry et al., 2019). Theme generation entailed a process of grouping or compressing themes, which is a critical step in the analysis since the themes must provide a coherent story about the data (Terry et al., 2019). In the current study Braun and Clarke (2006) was used for data analysis.

Results:



**Community Role**

Community can play a very active role in the successful transition of ASD adolescents. Community includes every person involved in the autism support system. It includes families,

schools personnel, teachers, peers, counselors and other professionals. A positive and welcoming attitude from every member of the community can be very beneficial for effective transition.

## **Role of psychologist:**

Role of the school counselor and psychologist is fundamental in effective transition. School psychologist can design transition planning and can implement.

Mental health professionals reported that psychologists having expertise and working experience in the field of autism can play a key role in the successful transition of ASD adolescents. They can reduce barriers and overcome personal hindrances in the transitional process.

Some of mental health professionals suggested that psychologists can work best by developing individualized Education programs (IEPs) for each ASD child and can develop transitional interventional programs to facilitate students.

Mental health professionals also reviewed the emotional and behavioral support, coping skills, social skills and emotion regulation skills provided by school psychologists can overcome the personal hindrances in successful transitional processes.

Family counseling and primary-level interventions were also recommended by the mental health experts for the psychologists working with special needs students.

## **Role of the parents:**

Parental and family involvement have a significant impact on effective transition. Autistic children spend a lot of time with their families so active collaboration of school family can have significant impact on the growth of children with autism.

Parents and family play a huge role in the development of children's personalities and behaviors, so it is not possible to ignore the importance of family and parents.

Mental health professionals highlighted the importance of parent-school and parent-parent coordination for the successful transition of ASD adolescents.

Mental health professionals suggested that parents should foster a sense of independence and self-advocacy in ASD adolescents through guidance, acceptance, and consistent support.

## **Role of the schools:**

According to the expert view of mental health professionals, schools should play an active role in

facilitating the transitional process of ASD adolescents. Schools should so specialized transitional planning for their students.

As ASD adolescents have special needs, their environment should be user-friendly. Sensory friendly environment was also suggested by the mental health professionals.

Schools should teach functional academic skills to their special needs students. An inclusive environment should be promoted. Schools should also provide skills-based education and vocational training to their ASD adolescents.

## **Discussion:**

The present study was conducted to explore the role of community in addressing the transitional issues among autistic adolescents. Purposive sampling was utilized to gather the desired sample. 11 mental health professionals having experience of at least 2 years and parents were included in the study. The sample was selected by using a structured interview guide. The sample of the current study was selected by using purposive sampling technique which is a non-probability technique.

During data analysis, researchers categorized community roles in three domains including psychologist role, parental role and school role. Previous research studies has also highlighted the worth of combined effects of whole community including families, health care and schools for effective transition planning and implementation (Cook, 2020).

Mental health professionals revealed that psychologists should play a very active and healthy role in successful transition. Psychologists should focus on key deficits or barriers in successful transition and should try to overcome these. Psychologists should include all stakeholders in the development of IEPs and should focus on skills development which will communicate a sense of empowerment to the autistic students. Mental health professionals also reported that psychologists should include families in all therapy processes and should psycho-educate parents about the diagnosis and prognosis of autism.

Noor et al (2020) conducted a study on mental health professionals and found out that on average

very few mental health professionals have an awareness of autism. This is a very alarming situation that mental health professionals don't have knowledge about the wide spectrum of autism.

Pakistan with the with a population of more than 197 million is the developing country in Southeast Asia and Pakistan is considered as 5<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the world (Imran et al., 2011). More than 38% of our population is under age 15 (Imran & Azeem, 2014). In our country, healthcare sector is largely neglected. According to reported only 3 % of the total annual budget is devoted for health including mental health (Imran & Azeem, 2014). So with these limited resources, it is difficult to give proper attention on autism resource institutes. On the government level, there are very few autistic institutes which are not sufficient to meet the demands of the nation. Private autistic institutes charge a lot which is impossible for parents to pay. On the other hand, there are no training institutes for mental health professionals who can train them in the field of neurodevelopmental disorders including autism. Mental health professionals emphasized that higher authorities in Pakistan should take autism seriously because these children require extra care and their families' mental health is also affected by the condition of their children. So to make Pakistan a healthier nation, special focus should be given on autism.

Mental health professionals in the current study also emphasized the healthy involvement of families and parents in a successful transition. Parents play a key role in child development and a child spend most of his/her time with families (Wood, 2019). Mental health professionals viewed parental collaboration with schools and other health care providers a most powerful tool to success. Hughes et al., (2022) focused on the experiences of parents in collaborating with schools to develop transition plans. Qualitative data highlighted the challenges and successes of parental advocacy, including navigating bureaucratic systems and fostering partnerships with educators. This research underscores the vital role of parents in ensuring that transition plans align with the needs and goals of their children.

Todd, Beamer & Goodreau, (2014) identified some barriers in family school collaboration. In their study, they found out that inefficient mechanisms, poor participation plans and using methods that are against inclusion are the barriers to active family-school collaboration. It is extremely important to overcome these barriers and promote family-centered approaches because families know best about their children's strengths and needs so their participation will ease the transition and inclusion (Simón & Barrios, 2019). A similar study by Reid & Moore, (2019) revealed that parents of students with ASD play a crucial role in the transition process, and their perspectives have been a focus of qualitative research. Many parents actively engage in advocacy efforts to ensure that their child's needs are met during transitions.

Schools can also play a very positive role in transition planning. According to mental health professionals, schools should prepare students for transition. Schools should provide proper accommodations and support for effective transition. Smith et al., (2022) conducted interviews with special education teachers, counselors, and transition coordinators. Qualitative findings emphasized the importance of collaboration, individualized planning, and ongoing training for professionals to effectively support students with ASD through transitional periods.

**Limitations and future recommendations:** Next-level studies can be done by using a larger sample size. Next-level studies can also explore the community role for addressing the transitional issues of autistic children and adults.

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