

Unravelling the Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Malaysian Fathers with Autistic Children

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Abstract

Autism spectrum disorder or ASD is a lifelong developmental disorder typified by impairment of social interaction, communication deficits, and repetitive behaviour. The number of children diagnosed with ASD is currently increasing globally, including in Malaysia. As the main caregiver for these children, parents face challenges due to their children's demanding situation. The rising prevalence of ASD go together with the continuous endeavours to understand and support parents in meeting challenges related to their child's ASD. While fathers nowadays are generally more involved in raising children, many research focus on parenting ASD children remain to be inclined toward mothers' experiences. This paper aims to provide an understanding on the challenges encountered by fathers with their special children. A purposive and snowball sampling of three fathers of children (aged 7 to 14 years old) with ASD participated in an in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interview. Data were transcribed and analysed using the thematic analysis method. The fathers narrated that the challenges they have encountered include: Understanding the child-specific behaviours; accepting the diagnosis; encountering phase-based temporal challenges; finding strength and patience; handling endless physical, emotional and financial sacrifices; and reflecting on religion matters. This study has identified parental challenges associated with autistic children that can serve as the foundation of the children's well-being and positive development as the experience of parents impacts parents themselves too. Additionally, findings have also highlighted the coping strategies utilised by the fathers to ensure they stay rational, stable, sensible.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), autistic, fathers, challenges, coping mechanisms*

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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or better known as autism, is a lifetime neurological developmental disorder. It has no clear physical symptoms but is usually typified by signs of marred social, cognitive,

and communication functions. Some studies also indicate other traits such as repetitive and controlled behaviours, interests and activities shown in the early years (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Levesque, 2018; Schneider, Glaser & Senju, 2020). More commonly occurring among boys than girls with a 4:1 ratio (Schneider, Glaser & Senju, 2020), 1 in 60 children worldwide is reported to have ASD (WHO, 2019). The upsurge of ASD cases is also happening in Malaysia (Kaur, Engakasa, Sivanesom & Bahar, 2015), in which about 8000 to 9000 born yearly may possibly have autism (Dina Murad, 2019).

In contrast to typical normal children, the ones with ASD demand more support and care. Hence, it is anticipated that parents of ASD children face more stress and pressure (Hartley, DaWalt & Schultz, 2017). Many studies on parenting ASD children remain to be inclined toward mothers' experiences (Cheuk & Lashewicz, 2016). Fathers nowadays are more involved in the family affairs, specifically in nurturing the children. This paper thus, aims to deliver an account on the challenges encountered by fathers with ASD children. By understanding what the fathers have and are continuously facing, conceivably specific programmes and supports can then be offered to these fathers and their autistic children.

Past Studies

Facing challenges is inevitable for parents with autistic children. There is an increasing research interest in the parenting of children with ASD (e.g. Ludlow et al, 2012; Gona et al, 2016; Pejovic-Milovancevic et al, 2018; O'Nions et al, 2018), which mostly emphasise the strategies in coping with autistic children. Evidence from previous literature show challenges that parents with autistic children face come in phases starting with pre-diagnosis, followed by diagnosis, and finally living with the diagnosis for life which requires the ongoing burden of financial commitment and frequenting treatment services (Kenny & Corkin, 2011; Maquenie, Rodger, Mangohig, & Cronin, 2011; Twombly, Holtz, & Daub-Sychra, 2011). These challenges are factors that contribute to stress and other psychological effects such as shame, depression, grief, or guilt in parents (Meadan, Halle, & Ebata, 2010).

Earlier studies on parents of ASD primarily focused on the mothers' experiences (Barker et al., 2010; Bloch & Weinstein, 2010; Dillenburger et al., 2010; Moyson & Roeyers, 2011). However, in reality, autism does not only affect the mother; but also, father, as well as the family in general (Barker et al., 2011; Kenny & Corkin, 2011). Fathers with children diagnosed with autism experienced fatherhood quite differently from typical fathers. Therefore, as this research is aimed to find out more about the challenges and coping mechanisms that fathers experienced in their life journey with their autistic children, the review of the past literature will focus on this. Many articles reviewed, mention these two aspects – challenges and coping strategies. Most of the studies utilised qualitative approach as the methodology. The overall trend illustrates positive development in this area i.e. emerging research on the role of fathers having autistic children. This indicates that more attention on awareness and acknowledgment are now being given to fatherhood and recognising the essential role of a father in the development, maintenance, and outcome of family in facing the autism spectrum disorder.

Previous studies have shown that fathers raising children with autism report higher stress level, parenting issues and lower levels of life satisfaction (Darling, Senatore & Strachan, 2012; Hayes & Watson, 2013). Some of the reasons for stress include financial as they need to work more time to

respond to the child's medical needs and unable to join activities as a family or activities for himself (MacDonald & Hastings, 2010). In addition, due to their role and responsibility as the family provider, as well as societal gender role expectations, they may suffer in silence as they need to contain or suppress their emotions to 'stay strong' for their spouse and family. Levels of anxiety and worry may also emerge for those taking care of autistic child (Ericzen, et al., 2005).

A study by Potter (2017) found that around half from the fathers they surveyed are involved either mainly or equally responsible with mothers in the day-to-day routine care of their children with autism. They also play a significant role in their children's education. However, one of the major challenges with this is disparity in the child education and ability to attend school meetings which usually occur during the day and clashes with their working time. Additionally, having an autistic child also affected their commitment at work at some point causing them to either choose part-time or shift work or self-employment. The study also found that most of the fathers experienced stress quite a lot, with factors leading to stress being worry of the future, family finances, management of child's behaviour, lack of service, and care-giver fatigue. Two key coping strategies that the study highlighted are focusing on the positives and coming up with ideas for what to do. In terms of support, the study found that the greatest source is their partner. Other sources of support include other family members. This theme of support also recurs in other literature (Hall & Gaff, 2010). Spouse and family members are regarded as informal social supports while formal supports refer to programmes in the community. Support can also be seen in terms of parent training or parental education programmes where parents are taught intervention strategies such as communication skills, reducing tantrums and other behaviours to enhance relations (Elder et al., 2011). Samantha Cheuk & Bonnie Lashewicz (2015) show how fathers take the challenges in a positive manner whereby the success in catering to their children's unanticipated demands is considered a triumph.

In contrast with the findings above, there are some studies that show the opposite i.e. lack of support especially in relation to emotional outlet for fathers to express feelings and concerns of their child. There are also challenges in couples' relationships including dissatisfaction due to role distribution, commitment, conflicts, and intimacy; especially at the time following diagnosis (Hock, Timm, & Ramisch, 2012; Robinson et al., 2015).

Another study by Hannon (2013) found that besides the challenges mentioned earlier, fathers also experienced frustrations due to lack of information and awareness about autism as well as resources. There are also negative racial interactions in various contexts such as disparity or stigma within the community, schools, and services. Stigma was also highlighted in Broady et al. (2015) whereby according to him, parents reported higher stigma if the level of autism is more severe. In terms of coping mechanisms, fathers in this study were involved in social organisations that helped provide services to them. One major coping strategy is maintaining hope and a study by Santos (2014) also echoed this theme. Religious and spiritual support was also found to contribute to reducing stress level in fathers with autistic children (Ekas, Whitman, & Shivers, 2009). In fact, some recent studies have highlighted that many parents resorted to religion and spirituality as coping strategies (e.g. Davis & Kiang, 2020; Mohannad Mohammad Husni Amireh, 2019).

In the Malaysian context, it is agreeable that parents of ASD children shoulder more responsibilities, times and efforts, especially that involves financial cost and the children's behaviour (Shin Ying Chu

et al., 2020). This could lead to other challenges, that is maintaining marital relationship. Due to their children's challenging behaviour, these parents tend to experience marital strain and disrupted family life, as well as fewer opportunities to socialise with their communities (Allik et al, 2006; Myers et al, 2009).

As caregivers, both must be supportive of each other. Wan Nooraini et al. (2018) stress that spouse is the best social support in which both should at the same time face the stress while maintaining autism children. Their study proves that the parents in their study consider their partner "...a strong and mentally and emotionally supportive partner and source of support". Bahry et al. (2019) state that parents of children with disability should emphasise on achieving a balance between their work, their stress, and caring for their child.

Fathers play a significant role in the psychological development of children with disabilities in Malaysia (Ahmad & Dardas, 2015). Shiang Y. Eowa et al. have also indicated in their study how working fathers in Malaysia affect their children to have higher severity with their ASD. Father's involvement is important especially in developing play skills and language skills in which better behaviour is exhibited by the children when there are interactions between them.

Malaysia, however, lacks studies that exclusively examine fathers' experiences caring for their children with disability. Focus is always given to investigating the experiences of mothers' wellbeing as most studies found that mothers have higher stress levels due to the fact that most of the responsibilities of taking care of children lie on mothers. Besides, women are considered more emotional when dealing with stressful conditions (Hassan & Inam 2013), making them worthy the subjects as they are more willing, expressive, and open when sharing their experiences. Despite the lack of studies done, a few has extensively discussed fathers' experiences in caring for their autistic children.

Kartini Ilias et al. (2019) have explored the experiences, risk and protective processes of resilience in parents of children with ASD in Malaysia. The fathers in their study highlighted their feelings of "denial" and "distancing" in the early phase when they first noticed the symptoms in their children. This also proves that not only mothers, but fathers in this study were actively participated in the diagnostic and treatment planning process. The study also indicated that the majority of the father participants expressed significant concern about the challenge of facing the behavioural issues exhibited by their child with ASD. Here, the fathers described how they dealt with the difficult situation and learned to be self-aware and to control their emotions. The fathers also mentioned how caring for autistic children has changed their lifestyle.

Awatif Hannan Suhaimi et al. (2020) have also successfully given comprehensive qualitative descriptions of fathers' perspectives as caretakers. Unlike the aforementioned study, the fathers in this study were much more willing to accept the condition of their children as they were calm when their children were given the autism diagnosis. However, feeling stress in managing children with autism is inevitable. The study found that the causes of stress among these fathers were due to their autistic children's behavioural problems and the pressure to cater to the needs and attention of the children the best they could. This is supported by Ahmad and Dardas' (2015) study that found the stress experienced by the Malaysian fathers of children with disabilities stems from various aspects, one of which is the difficulty in understanding and controlling the behaviour of their children. The fathers in

Awatif Hannan Suhaimi et al.'s had to gather as much strength and patience when confronting the unpredictable and problematic behaviours such as tantrums and having to be told the same thing repeatedly. Besides being patient, the key to cope with the stress is by having confidence in God to uplift the spiritual comfort and clarity of mind. Still, at times, these fathers were unable to contain their emotions and ended up scolding their autistic children. Additionally, fathers in the study shared that they experienced fatigue when they had to juggle taking care of their autistic and the other children as they did not have sufficient time to manage a child with autism and other family members. They described that having autistic children affects their role as a father since they need to balance their responsibilities with their other 'normal' children, work, and other life matters.

It is important for professionals to become more aware of the significant role fathers play alongside mothers in the lives of children with autism and they need to find more effective ways of giving support to both parents. Thus, indeed, the present study is timely and important to add to the literature of parent experiences and challenges, especially one that highlights the representation of fathers in 'parent' samples, as they are rarely featured, as compared to that of mothers.

Methodology

The study aims to answer the following research question: What are the problems and challenges faced by the fathers of an autistic child? Aligned with this, the study was an exploratory, qualitative study which employed the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. One-on-one, in-depth semi-structured interview sessions were conducted with three fathers of autistic children, ranging between one and a half to two hours per session. While listening to the recordings, analyses were completed by a line-by-line reading of the verbatim interview transcriptions using thematic analysis.

The qualitative approach was used to allow fathers to share their stories and to enhance the ability of the researchers to understand the quality and enormity of the experiences the participants had. In line with the qualitative research design employed in this study, a descriptive background of the fathers involved is presented to provide a contextual setting. The three participants are Malay, Muslim professional fathers.

Adam is 42 years old. His one and only child was found to have autism at the age of 3. The abnormal development of his son was sensed when his son was having speech delay. His special son now is 14 years old and diagnosed to have nonverbal autism. Adam and his wife started to explore about autism via the internet and found a local support group known as "Persatuan Autism Muslim Malaysia" and are among its pioneer members in Malaysia.

Ben who is 35 years old, detected his eldest son of having autism at a very early age of one and a half years. His son who has been diagnosed with a mild to moderate level of autism is referred to the paediatrician because of his speech delay and lack of eye contact. At the time of this study, apart from the special education class at a public primary school, Ben also enrolls his son to an autism laboratory attached to the Faculty of Education of a local university for an intervention programme.

Chairil is a 46-year-old master's degree holder. At the age of 4, his youngest son was detected to have autism. His son is now 7 years old. He is fortunate to have strong support from members of his family. His father-in-law is even monetarily supportive of his special son's intervention. For his son, he chose

a private school that specifically addresses the special needs of children with autism, which offers speech and occupational therapy.

Findings and Discussion

As mentioned above, the purpose of the current study is to explore the trials and ordeals faced by the fathers of autistic children. Most of the participants experienced fathering a child with ASD as challenging. By drawing out stories about their involvement with their children, several themes have emerged which will be discussed in the following sub-sections.

Understanding the child-specific behaviours

As highlighted by Ahmad and Dardas (2015) and Awatif Hannan Suhaimi et al. (2020), the fathers participating in this study also reported that their children's behaviour was one of the most significant challenges they faced. The participants experienced their children as having poor emotional regulation, most often evident in temper tantrums and inappropriate or excessive aggression. The excerpt below reflects the participants' understanding that their children's aggressive behaviour is generally an expression of frustration.

“He cried. Even if we console him, he refused. We didn't even know the reasons. But now we know... he doesn't want his little brothers to make so much noise. We need to find the reason ...” (Ben, A12).

Due to the composition of the sample, most of the participants had not yet come into contact with formal mainstream educational systems. However, one participant whose son was engaged in the mainstream education at the time of the study, expressed concern at his son's poor scholastic progress.

“The challenge is when he selectively chooses what he wants and doesn't want to do. When we ask him to do this and that, he refuses. We really need to be patient, really patient ... many times, we have to do together with him. But, yes that is a real challenge ...” (Ben, A16).

Accepting the diagnosis

Another major challenge faced by the fathers is the initial acceptance regarding the fact that their son is an autistic child. This finding is rather predictable, as no normal human being can easily or readily admit that they have a 'non-normal' or an atypical child. This is especially difficult for Adam because his autistic child is his first child, and for Ben, because the autistic child is his only son, whereas for Chairil - his autistic child is the only one having ASD out of 4 of his children. These reasons have caused the fathers to accept the fact that they have an autistic child with a heavy heart at the initial stage.

However, with time, they managed to admit and believe that their child is actually a gift from God. They can now wholeheartedly accept the fact, as mentioned by the fathers that they 'redha' (contentment or the state of gaining the approval and pleasure of God) of what has been decreed by the Almighty.

“For me, alhamdulillah. My strength is my wife ... we need to go back to religion, to really accept ...” (Adam, B7).

“Of course, initially we felt sad. Normal, but alhamdulillah we passed that phase quickly. Maybe because of family support – in-laws, my own family. All understood and willingly accepted ... if we continue crying, the child is still like that. Better for us to deal with it ...” (Ben, B9).

“So, it makes us accept, accept ... redha, redha, redha” (Chairil, B10).

“Yes, I can really accept ... redha, go back to religion. Whatever issue on disable child, other social problems – go back to religion, how far we believe, Allah has given us a special child – it means something ...” (Chairil, B13)

In fact, Ben repeatedly mentioned that he has really accepted the situation destined by God for his son, and for his family to move on and deal with.

“It’s ok. This is ‘anak syurga’ (the son of heaven). Accepting the fact makes us ok. Other people are fine with it, why don’t we? So it makes us quickly move on and think about what to do. No matter how hard we cry, the boy will still be like that. So, it’s better for us to deal with whatever affecting his future. We have to think that way ...” (Ben, B19).

This finding matches with previous studies (e.g. Kenny & Corkin, 2011; Maquenie, Rodger, Mangohig, & Cronin, 2011; Twombly, Holtz, & Daub-Sychra, 2011) which demonstrate that parents challenges come in phases, and many think that accepting the diagnosis is one of the toughest (Kartini Ilias et al., 2019). This discovery is closely related to the next finding which is encountering phase-based temporal challenges, whereby the fathers described various chapters of their child’s growth and development as these episodes are among the experiences that affect them.

Encountering phase-based temporal challenges

The fathers also related their experiences of the different challenges they faced throughout the journey of fatherhood. When asked about the most difficult phase, each father has their own stories. For Adam, the most challenging was when they wanted to carry out the early intervention—to actually get to really ‘know’ his son.

“It’s the early phase when we wanted to do the early intervention. To know him. I think that was the hardest phase. Just started to know him. How to teach him to do toilet-train. Teaching him how to eat is difficult too. At that time, he did not use his hand, he used the spoon. So, the most difficult was the early, beginning stage. To know him” (Adam, C11).

For Ben, his biggest test was when his son was already a toddler, but he needed to be taken care of like he was still a baby. At that age, he was still in diapers, and potty train seemed impossible. Although he did not show as much tantrums as other autistic children his age, the dedication and devotion in taking care of him was indeed a difficult phase for Father B and his family, as evident in the excerpt,

“The challenge was when he already 3 years old, but we had to manage him like a baby. He was still in diapers ...” (Ben, C21).

The varying phase-based challenges encountered by the fathers have affected each one of them in different ways. Then again, it is beneficial that fathers identify, reflect and be in control of the situations because it might bring about other stressors such as shame, depression, grief, or guilt in parents (Meadan, Halle, & Ebata, 2010).

Finding strength and patience

In line with past studies (e.g. Awatif Hannan Suhaimi et al., 2020), it is also found that all the fathers have faced the challenges of mustering their might and patience in raising and attending to their autistic child. Dealing with the usual predictable and unpredictable outbursts is common, but more pain and worry come into the picture when some of the child's behaviours cause danger. This can be seen through the experience such as the ones highlighted below.

“The most difficult thing ... I can still tolerate his delayed speech, but when it comes to dangerous things... that's too dangerous. For example, he's holding the phone, he doesn't know the right way, he threw the phone, and it broke! We cannot scold him”. (Chairil, D18)

“... when he plays his bicycle for example, unlike other normal children who know at least to look first if there is any car etc, but for him, he will just go and ride out of the gate without being aware of the danger of being hit by the car...” (Chairil, D20).

Handling endless physical, emotional and financial sacrifices

Another theme that emerges among the fathers interviewed is the sacrifices they made, be it physically (Awatif Hannan Suhaimi et al., 2020), emotionally (Hannon, 2013) or financially (Potter, 2017). Although all the fathers admitted that more sacrifices were made by their wives (Cheuk & Lashewicz, 2016), they too undertook the responsibilities and obligations in nurturing their autistic child. This is evident in the following excerpts:

“When I scold him, he would be very sad ... Dads – their specialty is different (compared to moms). But dads have to be like moms too. ‘Feel’ a bit more – stronger emotions ...” (Adam, E14).

“We spent a lot on our son's treatment, and education – we sent him to the public school and also extra sessions at the physio centre ...” (Ben, E21).

“Monthly expenditure is also high, but we do it for our son ...” (Chairil, E17).

This tallies with previous studies (e.g. Awatif Hannan Suhaimi et al., 2020) that fathers were impacted by having autistic children as they need to strive more in order to keep their work, as well as other life matters, in place.

Reflecting on religion matters

One more distinct finding gathered from this study is the marked concerns of the fathers toward the Islamic practices. Apart from the full acceptance or ‘redha’ discussed earlier, the fathers also related their odyssey as fathers of autistic children to the Islamic teachings which need to be fulfilled. They

are really concerned about how to teach their child about the responsibilities as a Muslim like praying, reciting the Quran and other Islamic rules. An example was aptly given by Chairil,

“By now, at this age, he should have known how to perform prayers. He should know how to ‘mengaji’ (recite the Quran) a bit. But, we can’t proceed with those just yet. We have to wait a bit. That’s the challenge of being a father – the religion’s commands. I need to explain to him- you have to pray, to read the Quran, later to undergo circumcision. Those are big challenges. To me, I have to make sure at certain age, he knows. Even though maybe Islam has exceptions for this kind of people. But he is not insane, he is sane, Just a bit lesser understanding. Currently that’s the concern in my mind - I have to explain about all the ‘hukum’ (ruling in Islam)” (Chairil, F26).

This finding too corresponds with other studies (e.g. Davis & Kiang, 2020; Mohannad Mohammad Husni Amireh, 2019) which highlight that many parents resorted to religion and spirituality as part of their coping strategies. However, in this current study, it is specifically related to Islamic beliefs held strongly by the fathers interviewed.

Coping Strategies of Fathers with Autistic Kids

The analysis also suggests that the participants utilised certain coping strategies in dealing with the challenges they encountered. The next section of the paper delineates the survival tactics that were employed in confronting the challenges of being the fathers of an autistic child.

Gathering information online

Suited to the era of astounding technological advancement in which almost everything could be found on the internet, the fathers in this study also made use of the resource to obtain information regarding autism and to discover new knowledge to apply to their own autistic child. An example can be seen from what was articulated by Adam and Chairil,

“Oh, I love watching Facebook ‘Special Book for Special Kids (or Special Children). A teacher-couldn’t recall his name-Henry I think. He loves to explore. If we watch the page, there are a variety of disabilities shown. I like to see how he communicates with the kids. We can get so much – He is based in the US... so many experiences ...” (Adam, a26).

“We don’t physically go ... everything is on the net. We try and have a look, which is suitable for us to apply. Well, sometimes it is, sometimes t is not. We will have a go ...” (Chairil, a9).

Other studies (e.g. Broady et al., 2015; Santos, 2014) are in alignment with this finding where the internet is one of the important sources for parents to search for information to assist them in nurturing their autistic child.

Joining support groups

Another coping mechanism utilised by all the fathers in this study is by joining some kind of support groups where the members truly understand what they are going through. Naturally, humans need to

be affiliated and accepted by members of certain group as part of their emotional needs (Luther, Canham & Cureton, 2005). The sense of belongingness is deemed important by all the fathers.

“We have to find a circle that understands so that we can express and exchange stories. This is a must so that it can boost our motivation. For example, if we wanted to attend a wedding ceremony. To bring along the child is indeed a struggle...” (Adam, b27).

“When we join a parental community with children like this ... At Permata Kurnia, they organise a lot of programmes which involve parents, children. So that is where we meet. Not only us actually ... there are many others. We are not alone” (Ben, b30).

“... the society for parents with autistic children – like a lab – there, we gain many things. And also Facebook Autism Malaysia” (Ben, b31).

“I think it is important to have some kind of support group to share our unique experiences” (Chairil, b5).

Practising religious beliefs

A further finding, perhaps unique to the participants of this study, is the dutiful performance towards Islamic teachings. All the fathers expressed their utmost central beliefs of the Islamic faith which is the understanding of Allah’s absolute power. By devoting total submission to God, they find peace and solace.

“... I want teach my son ‘mengaji’ [recite the Quran]. But when he cannot do it ... he cannot even talk [a non-verbal autistic child]. When I was in school and even at the university, nobody taught me how to teach an autistic child to read the Quran ... so, I feel I’m obliged to do it ...” (Adam, c32).

“I learn to accept God’s fate and destiny...” (Ben, c3).

“There are Quranic verses that we can practise ... so, we will try” (Chairil, c12).

This has been emphasised especially by Adam because he is an expert in Quran by profession. He added the miracle of Quran, and the effects to his child.

“The Quran is ‘syifa war rahmah’ [remedy and blessings]. So, in this context if we go back to the concept. Whatever we do, we put the Quran as number one. So, eventually the Quran can change ... it’s not us, but the Quran will change our child” (Adam, c35).

He also makes sure that the recitation of Quran session as a part of his and his son’s daily routine.

“So, Al-Quran is like a therapy for him...” (Adam, 36).

This resonates a study by Gray (2006) who found that there are now more parents who coped through their religious faith and other emotion - focused strategies, as compared to dependence on service providers, family support, social withdrawal and individualism.

Accommodating children’s special needs

One more coping mechanism that the fathers use is to accept, adapt and adjust to their child's specific needs. (Kartini Ilias et al., 2019; Marsack-Topolewski & Wilson, 2021). One example can be seen through Adam who shared one of the techniques he used to teach his son.

“A technique called sight words reading-a child should learn to recognise without sounding out the letters, which is also taught in the Quran” (Adam, d40).

“Whatever it is, he is our priority ...” (Ben, d41).

Giving explanations

An extra effort made by the fathers is to provide explanations about autism to the child himself, and also to the other family members so that both parties understand the issue of autism. By doing this, half of the battle is already won, and reduces the stress faced by the fathers. This is evident from Adam's narrative below.

“We cannot break their routine, if we do, they will throw tantrum. But my son is ok, he isn't that rigid. If we tell him today we're not going there, but to another place. He is ok when we explain...” (Adam, xx).

“For myself, I explain to my parents, my other children – the siblings. So, alhamdulillah, they understand better and better, and the best thing is even his cousin protects him ...” (Adam, xy)

Teaching by showing

Additionally, to help them stay sensible, the fathers realised that teaching their child by showing can also help to lessen the tension. Adam and Chairil believe that limitless demonstrations will help the child to learn and accept a certain concept taught to them.

“We have to show that parents play a very important role. If we pray, we must sit together with him, he needs to be with us ...” (Adam, f43).

“When eating, sometimes he eats with his left hand. We must direct, we need to say ‘ok, please eat with your right hand’. Slowly. Take his hand, and hold his hand, hold the fries. And put the fries into the mouth. Right hand, right hand. We need to do that repeatedly” (Chairil, f30).

Giving rewards

Finally, the fathers also give rewards to their child. Many previous studies acknowledge this method too (e.g. Plaza, Rico & Grau-Sevilla, 2020). An example was given by Ben,

“Usually, we give rewards. Things that he likes. He loves Koko Crunch. When he did something good, we give him some” (Ben, g45).

This will help the autistic child to be cheery and display less tantrum or outburst.

The findings of this study have pointed that there are several tests and trials faced by the fathers of autistic children. Problems like understanding ASD traits, admitting them, being strong, and enduring

the crisis are among the challenges faced by the fathers. In meeting those challenges, the fathers also show their devotion by practising some survival skills which make them feel sane and sensible. It is mainly noted that the fathers in this study bow to the will of God, and by wholeheartedly accepting the fate, has made them stronger and more resilient.

Conclusion

In general, the voices of fathers, more specifically fathers of children with autistic children, have not been very well described since many parenting studies remain to be concentrating on mothers' experiences. Some argue that mothers are seen as their children's main carers, thus making the depiction of fathers' roles hardly comparable to that of mothers. This study therefore contributes to the literature by highlighting and showing the ordeals faced by fathers of autistic children, together with the strategies they utilise in dealing with what they are experiencing. Findings bring to light various challenges which include knowing, accepting and going through all the different phases in raising an autistic child, as well as the means that are used by the fathers in coping with what they are going through. The shared experiences are valuable discoveries that could be a guide to other parents who are in a similar situation. The findings also draw attention to the needs for family physical, emotion, psychosocial and economic provisions that could be provided to parents, fathers in particular, who are bringing up ASD children. The information is beneficial to relevant parties to provide suitable programmes, support and hopes to empower the fathers. Future studies involving more participants of other races in Malaysia could also be conducted so that profiling of fathers' challenges, problems and stressors is possible. Fathers need to be cared for and tended to because they are an important figure in the family.

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