

Review Article

Fathers of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder:
Literature ReviewErsa Lanang Sanjaya¹ , Dewi Retno Suminar¹, Nur Ainy Fardana¹ *1. Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia.***Citation** Lanang Sanjaya E, Retno Suminar D, Fardana NA. Fathers of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder: Literature Review. *Iranian Rehabilitation Journal*. 2022; 20(3):297-304. <http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/irj.20.3.1622.1>**doi** <http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/irj.20.3.1622.1>**Article info:****Received:** 03 Oct 2021**Accepted:** 26 Dec 2021**Available Online:** 01 Sep 2022**Keywords:**

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The involvement of parents in raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is crucial for both the child's development and family functioning. However, studies relating to parental involvement in parenting children with ASD mainly focus on the mother's perspective, resulting in a lack of understanding of the father's role. On the other hand, the father involvement in parenting plays a vital role in children, partners, and family dynamics.

Methods: The current research is a literature review utilizing a database called Scopus. The main objectives of the paper are to examine predictors of father involvement in parenting children with ASD and to provide an overview of fathers' experiences in raising children with ASD.

Results: A total of 100 articles were found. After the screening and review process, 21 articles were included in the main review. The literature review found that studies relating to father involvement in parenting children with ASD are dominated by research on the impacts on parents and descriptions of fathers' experiences raising children with ASD.

Discussion: Therefore, it is necessary to conduct studies on the predictors of father involvement in parenting children with ASD. In addition, the majority of studies on the parenting of fathers of children with ASD examine the issue from a Western perspective, thus necessitating broader studies. The research limitations are outlined in the article.

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Highlights

- Research related to ASD children is dominated by research that focuses on the experience of fathers in caring for ASD children with qualitative research methods.
- Few studies still examine predictor factors encouraging fathers to be involved in parenting ASD.
- Research related to the role of fathers in caring for ASD children is still dominated by research in the western context so that further studies are needed in a broader cultural context.

Plain Language Summary

Fathers have a vital role in parenting, including children with ASD. The fathers' involvement in the care of children with ASD will have a positive impact on children, partners, and family functioning. Unfortunately, research related to father involvement in ASD childcare is still lacking to be explored. Studies related to the care of ASD children are still dominated by the mother's point of view; therefore the picture related to the care of ASD children is still seen mostly from the mother's perspective. This is why studies related to the involvement of fathers in the care of ASD children still need to be carried out. This research is in the form of a literature review which can be a preliminary study to see a description of the father's involvement in the care of ASD children. The focus of this study is to examine the triggering factors for the involvement of fathers in the care of ASD children and the experience of fathers in caring for ASD children. This literature review uses one database, namely Scopus, with the search keywords "father" and "autism". A total of 21 manuscripts studied exist in this study. Based on this study, it was found that research related to the father's involvement in the care of ASD children was predominantly conducted in a western context and mostly referred to the experience of fathers in caring for ASD children. Few studies still explore the precipitating factors that make fathers want to be involved in raising children with ASD. Based on this, it is necessary to conduct research with a wider context and explore the triggering factors for father involvement in the care of ASD children.

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction and communication, as well as restricted and repetitive behavior, interests, and activities [1]. The center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released data showing that the prevalence of people with ASD in America has increased annually, so that in 2000, 1 in 150 children had ASD, and by 2016, it had reached 1 in 54 children [2]. Parents who have children with special needs experience higher levels of stress [3]. Based on a national survey conducted in England, Towers found that 41% of fathers of children with special needs experienced severe long-term stress, while 52% sometimes experience stress to the extent that mental and physical health disturbs them [4]. The reason for higher stress levels is that having a child with special needs consistently drains parents' mental and physical capacity [5]. Specifically, Schieve et al. revealed that parents of children with ASD exhibited higher levels of aggravation compared to parents of children with other special needs and parents of typical children [6].

Parental involvement in raising children with ASD is crucial for children facing psychosocial and educational challenges [7, 8]. Mothers and fathers play different roles in parenting children with ASD, requiring further investigation into the differences in their roles [9]. Unfortunately, research on parenting children with special needs, including children with ASD, is mostly conducted from the mother's perspective [10-12] and often overlooked the father's point of view [13] research investigating the unique contributions and psychological functioning of fathers of youth with developmental disabilities, and the role that fathers play in effective intervention, remains limited. Whereas evidence suggests that parent-mediated interventions for children with ASD. This finding is supported by a literature study conducted by Braunstein, et al. in the context of parents of children with ASD, which examined 404 articles between 2001 and 2010 of which 47,076 respondents were mothers and 8,714 were fathers. More precisely, 86.4% of the studies focused on mothers, 12.1% focused on mothers and fathers, and 1.5% focused on fathers alone [8]. In addition, the comprehensive literature review conducted by Diniz et al., conducted in

2019, found no articles on father involvement in the context of autistic children [14]. A study conducted by Flippin and Hahs-Vaughn also found that in the therapy process, fathers communicated less and participated less in assessment and planning [15] assessment, planning, and intervention.

In the context of families of children with special needs, fathers contribute vitally to the welfare of the mother, the child, and the family [16]. Fathers' involvement in the parenting of children with special needs affects the level of the mother's depression [17] literacy, play, and responsive caregiving activities at 9 months and maternal depressive symptoms at 4 years. Data for 3,550 children and their biological parents were drawn from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort data set. Analyses in a structural equation modeling framework examined whether the association between father involvement and maternal depressive symptoms differed for families of children with ASD, as well as the couple's marital satisfaction [16]. In contrast, conditions in which the father's contribution is felt to be insufficient, or does not meet the expectation of needs, prevent the family from func-

tioning healthily during a period in which the family is crucial for the wellbeing of children with special needs [18]. Fathers who are involved in parenting children with special needs can mutually support their partners in terms of financial needs and decision-making, as well as the child's future, if necessary [5].

More specifically, in the context of children with ASD who experience limitations in communication and social interactions, understanding and increasing the role of fathers in parenting is crucial in terms of both research and practice [9]. Fathers exhibit unique methods of interacting with their children that differ from mothers. When interacting, fathers more often utilize games involving physical activity than direct or educational exchanges [9, 19]. In addition, fathers generally use language and vocabulary that are higher level, more complex, more varied, less often used, and more abstract than mothers [20]. Therefore, fathers may provide an important contribution to the quality of symbolic interactions for children with ASD [9] and increase in the use of spontaneous single words [21, 22]. These findings highlight the importance of conducting research into father involvement in parenting

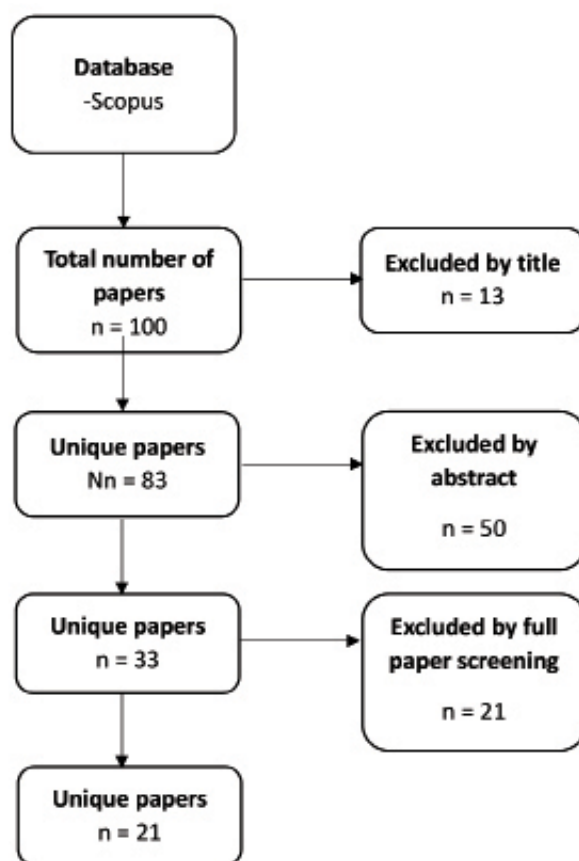


Figure 1. Flow diagram

children with ASD. The current research is a literature review with the main objectives of exploring the predictors of father involvement in parenting children with ASD and examining fathers' experiences of parenting children with ASD.

2. Materials and Methods

Publications were collected in June 2021 using the Scopus database without limiting the year of article publication. The keywords searched for in the article titles were "father" and "autism". The keywords were intentionally chosen broadly due to the lack of research on autism involving fathers. The general search criteria included articles with empirical data, in the English language, and with an unrestricted publication year, due to the minimal amount of research in the field. The search excluded books or book chapters, proceedings, and articles consisting of abstracts only. The inclusion criteria included research on predictors of father involvement and fathers' experiences in parenting children with ASD. The population of the search was not restricted to produce broader results.

The search resulted in 100 articles from the Scopus database. After screening the titles and abstracts by the inclusion criteria, 33 articles remained. A deeper examination of the 33 articles was conducted to determine whether the studies fulfilled the predetermined criteria, 21 articles were eligible for analysis, 15 (15%) of which were related to the experiences of fathers in parenting children with autism, and 6 (6%) of which involved research to predict father involvement in parenting. More precisely, the examination identified 3 descriptive studies, 5 papers relating to fathers' needs in parenting children with au-

tism, 11 studies on the impacts of paternal parenting on children, 29 papers on the impacts of parenting children with autism on fathers/parents, 2 studies relating to interventions, 12 medical manuscripts, 7 inaccessible papers, 1 paper on the causes of autism, and 1 study on tool development. The publication period of articles related to fathers' experiences in parenting and predicting father's involvement in parenting is from 2011 to 2021 (Figure 1).

3. Results

Study population

Based on the research findings, studies relating to parenting predictors for fathers of children with autism have expanded across Europe, Australia, China, Israel, and America. Meanwhile, research on the parenting experiences of fathers of children with autism was mostly conducted in America, Europe, Canada, Africa, and Israel. The population by region data are provided in Table 1. This finding highlights that research on fathers of children with autism, particularly studies related to parenting predictors and experiences, is dominated by studies conducted in the context of America, Canada, and European countries, or in other words, among Caucasian populations, resulting in the need for studies that cover wider contexts, including Asia and Africa.

Based on the research findings, the population types for studies on predictors of father parenting of children with autism consisted of 3 studies focusing on fathers only as the subject, and 3 studies focusing on couples. Meanwhile, all studies related to the parenting experiences of fathers of children with autism were conducted from the perspective of the fathers. The population by research type data and research methods data are provided in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 1. Population by region

| Populations | Parenting Predictors | Fathers' Experiences |
|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Europe | 2 | 3 |
| Australia | 1 | - |
| China | 1 | - |
| Israel | 1 | 1 |
| USA | 1 | 7 |
| Africa | - | 1 |
| Canada | - | 3 |
| Total | 6 | 15 |

Table 2. Population by research type

| Population Type | Parenting Predictors | Fathers' Experiences |
|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Father only | 3 | 15 |
| Couple | 3 | - |
| Total | 6 | 15 |

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Table 3. Research methods

| Methods | Parenting Predictors | Fathers' Experiences |
|--------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Quantitative | 5 | 2 |
| Qualitative | 1 | 13 |
| Total | 6 | 15 |

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4. Discussion

Parenting predictors

The study encountered 6 papers on the predicting factors of a father's involvement in parenting children with autism. This finding is important since Sharabi and Marom-Golan revealed through their research that mothers have a higher level of involvement in parenting and highlights the importance of identifying factors that lead fathers to be more involved [23]. The characteristics of the child affect the father involvement in parenting. Rudelli determined that when fathers feel parenting to be a burden, their parenting self-efficacy also decreases [11]. Wang et al. showed similar findings and showed that parenting stress negatively correlates with satisfaction in familial interactions and parental involvement, including for fathers, in parenting children [24]. Harley et al., revealed that the worse the child's health, the more distant the father will be [20].

A study by Wang et al. showed that father involvement in parenting correlates positively with their own and their partner's satisfaction with familial interactions, however, does not correlate with the mother's involvement in parenting [24]. Social support demonstrates a positive correlation with the father's involvement in parenting [11]. These findings differ from research conducted by Sharabi and Marom-Golan whose results show that social support, particularly from family members, affects the involvement of mothers and not fathers, while fathers are more heavily influenced by their level of education [23]. Couples' marital satisfaction also influences their perceptions of the burden of parenting, so that low levels of marital satisfaction make fathers

and their partners more likely to think that parenting a child with autism is a heavy burden [25]. Adopting a qualitative approach, Potter determined several barriers to the involvement of fathers of children with autism at school, including structural issues, such that school meetings are often held during work hours and as a result, fathers are unable to attend the meetings [19]. In addition, the issue of attitudes of educational institutions fails to adequately examine children's needs from the parents' perspectives, particularly the needs of fathers. May et al. revealed that a unique approach is required to encourage fathers to be more involved in parenting children with autism, for example, the intervention conducted by May et al. using the Text2Dad program, through which autism service providers can send information to fathers via short messages so that they feel and wish to be more involved in parenting [26].

Fathers' experiences

The study encountered 15 papers relating to fathers' experiences parenting children with autism. The studies seek to describe fathers' experiences parenting children with autism from various perspectives and contexts. The father's acceptance and adjustment is a crucial factor when discovering their child's autism. Several studies have attempted to examine fathers' experiences of accepting their child's autism diagnosis. Raffert et al. sought to assess the shift in fathers' expectations pre-birth and pre-diagnosis of the child compared to their experiences after the diagnosis of autism. The study revealed that before birth up until their children are diagnosed, fathers expect that having a child is fun and that the father acts as a protector. This perception, however, shifts after becoming aware of the child's diagnosis,

with fathers having to adjust their parenting style and focus more on the growth, development, and skills acquisition of their child, to the exclusion of all else [27].

Following Raffert et al. and Burrell et al. also describe father acceptance as a gradual process [7, 27]. Once the father accepted his child's condition, his parenting focuses shifts to prioritizing independence as the main objective. Cheuk and Lashewicz also outline the change in fathers' consciousness, in that they initially perceive themselves as equal to other fathers, then are required to modify their expectations, feel fatigued and jealous of other fathers, and ultimately feel lucky to have a child with autism [28]. Pottas and Pedro also examined fathers undergoing a process of reframing about their child's future [29]. Donaldson et al. revealed similar experiences in fathers from accepting the diagnosis, thinking about the future of their children, and thus feeling the need and benefits of participating in intervention programs [30]. Keller et al. showed that fathers of children with autism are more sensitive to and understanding emotions. However, on the other hand, they also feel socially isolated due to the complexities of parenting [31].

Hannon et al examined the parenting of fathers of children with autism with a greater emphasis on their social interactions. Hannon et al stated that in their social interactions, fathers often experience what they call microaggressions from those around them. The microaggressions experienced by fathers can be divided into two categories, microaggressions relating to stereotypes of fathers, for example, doubting a father's ability to parent a child with autism, and microaggressions relating to autism itself, for example, interactions in which the father's relatives respond to or comment on their parenting from their perspective, which is often inappropriate because it is viewed through the lens of typical children [32].

Manor-Binyamini takes a more cultural approach to examine the experiences of fathers of children with autism in the context of Bedouin communities [33]. Several of the challenges faced by fathers of children with autism in the local context of the Bedouin community include a lack of knowledge on autism, difficulty in accessing information, lack of information about autism in the Arabic language, and lack of access to social services. Moreover, Manor-Binyamini also describes the parenting experiences of fathers of children with autism, which are constructed based on cultural characteristics, resulting in stigma, a sense of humiliation, and lack of social support [33]. Burket et al. examined parenting experiences from an African American perspective. Important

factors in African American communities include faith in God and familial bonds [34].

Mitchell and Lashewicz focused on and attempted to illustrate play interactions between fathers and children. The fathers perceived adjustments in their expectations of their children, for example, the general expectation of fathers to play sports with their children changed in the context of children with autism [35]. Several fathers felt sad as a result of this phenomenon. In addition, playing was not conducted simply for the sake of playing but was used as a means for fathers to teach their children concrete skills. Ultimately, the fathers accepted their children's conditions and appreciated them in their entirety as human beings, and enjoyed the interactions. Hannon and Hannon illustrated fathers' processes of learning and teaching themselves and others about the condition of autism in children [32]. Seeking knowledge oneself about autism often focuses on self-directed learning based on various sources of information and curiosity about the etymology of autism. Moreover, fathers often attempt to teach others about their child's condition, including their immediate family, more distant relatives, and the community. Various studies have determined factors required by fathers in parenting children with autism, including the need to be heard [28], the support of relatives and colleagues of fathers of children with autism [29, 36], and professional assistance [36]. Meadan et al. revealed that to meet their own needs, several fathers advocated for the needs of their children [36].

Potter presents a broader perspective by adopting a descriptive quantitative approach. Potter utilized open questions to examine several factors, including negative emotional responses when fathers first learn of their child's diagnosis, and subsequent feelings of concern, predominately relating to their child's future. On the other hand, fathers also comprehend the advantages of the diagnosis because they can anticipate their child's behavior and are encouraged to seek further information on their child's condition. In addition, Potter highlights the impacts on fathers themselves, for example on their relationships with their partners. Several fathers felt that they did not receive adequate support from their community [37].

5. Conclusion

The current study provided several conclusions that are useful for future research. First, research on the fathers' involvement in parenting children with autism predominately focuses on topics relating to the impacts of parenting on fathers or parents, and fathers' experi-

ences parenting children with autism. Thus, future research should focus on understanding the factors that lead fathers to be more involved in parenting children with autism. Second, most previous studies have been conducted in a Western context, such as in Europe and America. This makes it necessary to expand the context of the study so that the picture related to father involvement with autistic children becomes richer. A limitation of this study is that it utilized only one database, such as Scopus. Furthermore, searching using keywords does not include synonyms. Therefore, studies may exist that were not included in the research.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

This article is a literature review with no human or animal sample.

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Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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