

## Chapter 20

# Coping Strategies of Parents of Children With ASD: A Scoping Review

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### ABSTRACT

*The purposes of this scoping review were: (a) utilize the CCM to provide a more cohesive summary of the knowledge base, and (b) offer insights into the coping strategies on which more research is needed. To identify the articles that explore the coping strategies of parents of children with ASD, a literature search was conducted using Indiana University (IU) OneSearch. Article selection was guided by the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Overall, 24 articles met the inclusion criteria. Results suggest that there are four underexplored coping strategies of the CCM (e.g., positive emotional, helplessness, preoccupation with the problem, and hedonic disengagement). However, there are four well-studied coping strategies of the CCM (e.g., negative emotional, problem avoidance, effectiveness, and problem-solving).*

### INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder, a neurodevelopmental disorder, is characterized by impairments in social-emotional reciprocity and non-verbal communicative behaviors (CDC, 2022). Moreover, it is characterized by repetitive patterns of behaviors, strict adherence to routines, hyperactivity to sensory input, and highly restricted interests. Generally, these characteristics are manifested at an early age. However, they may surface at times when social demands surpass children's capacities. Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often have comorbid disorders, such as intellectual disabilities, motoric problems, and learning disabilities (Lai et al., 2015). According to the World Health Organization (2022), one in 100 children is diagnosed with ASD worldwide.

Parents of children with ASD experience increased levels of stress, depression, and anxiety than parents of typically developing children (Al-Farsi et al., 2016; Lai et al., 2015). An empirical body of research

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has examined the factors that are associated with psychological distress in parents of children with ASD (e.g., Firth & Dryer, 2013; Muhammad et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2019). Firth and Dryer (2013) found that greater ASD-related behavioral and emotional impairment was highly associated with increased levels of psychological distress in parents. Demographic variables (e.g., sex and educational attainment) have also been found to be associated with psychological distress in parents of children with ASD. Muhammad et al. (2020) reported that mothers exhibited elevated levels of depression, stress, and anxiety than fathers. Zhou et al. (2019) found that low educational attainment was associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression, compared to mothers with university degrees.

Besides psychological distress, parents of children with ASD suffer from decreased levels of relationship satisfaction and increased rates of divorce (Bluth et al., 2013). In fact, Brobst et al. (2009) found that parents of children with ASD displayed higher levels of stress due to the intensity of their children's behavioral problems, and lower levels of relationship satisfaction than parents of typically developing children. No differences between the two groups were reported in relation to spousal support, commitment, and respect for partner. Hartley et al. (2010) reported that, during early childhood, divorce rates were high for parents of children with ASD and parents of typically developing children. Yet after early childhood (i.e., adolescence and adulthood), the rate of divorce remained high for parents of children with ASD only. Predictors of divorce in parents of children with ASD encompassed young maternal age and later birth order (i.e., second or third) of children with ASD.

## **COPING STRATEGIES**

Parents of children with ASD utilize an array of coping strategies as a means of alleviating the psychological distress related to raising a child with ASD (Alos et al., 2021). Coping is deemed as “cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding resources” (Vernhet et al., 2018, p. 747). Research on coping strategies has focused on two areas: (a) factors affecting parents' use of coping strategies, such as parental gender (Pepperell et al., 2018; Vernhet et al., 2018), parental ethnicity (Twoy et al., 2006), and children's age (Gray, 2006); and (b) dissimilarities between the coping strategies of parents of children with ASD and parents of typically developing children (Alos et al., 2021).

Parental gender shapes the types of coping strategies, employed by parents of children with ASD (Pepperell et al., 2018). Vernhet et al. (2018) reported that mothers utilized emotion-oriented coping strategies (e.g., venting emotions), whereas fathers incorporated problem-avoidance coping strategies (e.g., task-avoidance, diversion, and disengagement). Parental ethnicity also impacts the choice of coping strategies (Twoy et al., 2006). Twoy et al. found that Asian Americans employed reframing strategies (e.g., reappraisal and reinterpretation), while Caucasians incorporated passive appraisals (e.g., diversion and distraction). Age of children with ASD has been reported to impinge parents' coping strategies (Gray, 2006). Gray reported that parents incorporated social support and counseling as coping strategies when their children with ASD were young (i.e., childhood). When their children became older (i.e., adolescence), parents increased their use of emotion-oriented and religious coping strategies.

An empirical body of research has explored the differences in the coping strategies between parents of children with ASD and parents of typically developing children (e.g., Alos et al., 2021; Bujnowska et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2015; Padden & James, 2017). For example, Alos et al. (2021) found that parents of children with ASD had high mean scores on the four factors of the avoidance strategy (e.g., task-

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