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Caregiver Burnout and Psychological Counseling Needs Among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Hanoi, Vietnam

Hoang Van Quyet
Newday Center for Applied Psychology and Education

Nguyen Thi Ha
Hanoi Metropolitan University

Bui Thi Hong Minh
Hanoi Metropolitan University

Đinh Thi Kieu Oanh
Hanoi Metropolitan University

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ABSTRACT: Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often experience considerable psychological pressure in the process of caregiving and supporting their child's development. Prolonged caregiving demands may lead to caregiver burnout and increase the need for psychological support. This study aims to examine the level of caregiver burnout and the psychological counseling needs of parents raising children with ASD in Hanoi, Vietnam. The research was conducted with 98 parents who were directly caring for children diagnosed with ASD. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining a questionnaire survey with in-depth interviews.

The findings indicate that parents experienced a moderate level of caregiver burnout, with prominent manifestations including emotional exhaustion, feelings of overload, and a lack of personal time. In addition, parents reported a relatively high demand for psychological counseling services. In particular, they expressed strong needs for learning stress management strategies, receiving guidance on coping with caregiving-related stress, and participating in parent support groups.

The results suggest that developing psychological counseling programs and social support services for parents of children with ASD is essential in order to reduce psychological strain and enhance the mental well-being of families.

KEYWORDS: parents of children with autism spectrum disorder, caregiver burnout, psychological counseling needs, parental stress

1. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication, social interaction, and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior (World Health Organization, 2022). In recent years, the number of children diagnosed with ASD has increased in many countries around the world, creating significant challenges for families, particularly for parents who play the primary role in caregiving and supporting the development of their children.

Caring for a child with ASD often requires long-term and continuous parental involvement in a wide range of activities, including therapeutic interventions, special education programs, behavioral support, and daily caregiving tasks. This process is frequently accompanied by substantial demands on time, financial resources, and emotional energy, which may place parents at risk of experiencing prolonged psychological stress. International studies have consistently shown that parents of children with ASD experience higher levels of stress and psychological difficulties compared to parents of typically developing children (Hayes & Watson, 2013). Prolonged exposure to such pressures may lead to caregiver burnout, a state of emotional, psychological, and physical exhaustion resulting from sustained caregiving demands.

Caregiver burnout among parents may manifest through symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, feelings of being overwhelmed, a lack of energy to continue caregiving activities, and reduced ability to regulate emotions in stressful situations. Previous studies have indicated that parental burnout is closely associated with children's behavioral difficulties, the long-term caregiving burden, and the lack of adequate social support resources (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012; Rivard et al., 2014). When parents experience high levels of burnout, not only is their own mental well-being affected, but the effectiveness of caregiving and developmental support for the child may also be compromised.

In this context, psychological support services for parents of children with ASD have received increasing attention. Psychological counseling is considered a professional support approach that helps parents recognize and regulate their emotions, develop coping strategies for stress, and strengthen their ability to adapt to the challenges associated with caregiving. Several studies have demonstrated that counseling and

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psychological support programs can help reduce stress, improve mental well-being, and enhance the quality of life of parents raising children with ASD (Blackledge & Hayes, 2006; Pottie & Ingram, 2008).

However, in Vietnam, research on the mental health of parents of children with ASD remains relatively limited, particularly studies focusing on caregiver burnout and the psychological counseling needs of parents. Most existing domestic studies primarily concentrate on the characteristics of children with ASD or educational intervention approaches, while the psychological challenges experienced by parents have received comparatively little attention. This highlights the need for further research to examine the level of parental burnout and their needs for psychological support in the process of caring for children with ASD.

Based on this context, the present study aims to investigate caregiver burnout and the psychological counseling needs of parents of children with ASD in Hanoi, Vietnam. The findings are expected to provide a scientific basis for the development of psychosocial support programs for parents, thereby contributing to improved parental mental well-being and better support for the development of children with ASD.

2. METHODS

2.1. Participants

The study participants consisted of 98 parents who were directly caring for children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Hanoi, Vietnam. Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method from several intervention centers and specialized educational institutions providing services for children with ASD in the city.

All participating parents were actively involved in caregiving and participated in various aspects of their children's development, including therapeutic interventions, educational support, and daily living assistance. The selection of this participant group aimed to capture the real-life experiences of parents who are directly engaged in caring for children with ASD.

2.2. Research Methods

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative survey methods with in-depth interviews. A questionnaire survey was conducted to collect information on the level of caregiver burnout and the psychological counseling needs of parents of children with ASD. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore parents' lived experiences related to caregiving burnout and their perceived needs for psychological counseling support.

The questionnaire consisted of a series of statements describing parents' experiences and needs in the process of caring for their children. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

This approach allowed the researchers to quantify the degree of caregiver burnout and the psychological counseling needs experienced by parents, thereby enabling comparisons across different levels within the study sample. The questionnaire was designed to assess two main dimensions:(1) caregiver burnout, (2) psychological counseling needs among parents of children with ASD.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Characteristics of the Study Participants

The study was conducted with 98 parents who were directly caring for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Hanoi, Vietnam. The basic characteristics of the study participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study participants (N = 98)

No.	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Gender		
	Fathers	28	28.6
	Mothers	70	71.4
2	Age		
	Under 30	14	14.3
	30–39	52	53.1
	40–49	25	25.5
	Over 50	7	7.1
3	Duration of caring for a child with ASD		
	Less than 2 years	21	21.4
	2–5 years	46	46.9
	More than 5 years	31	31.7

The results indicate that most participants were mothers (71.4%), reflecting the common reality that mothers often take primary responsibility for caregiving and intervention for children with ASD. Regarding age distribution, the 30–39 age group accounted for the highest proportion (53.1%), which corresponds to the life stage when many families have young children and are actively involved in identifying, diagnosing, and intervening in developmental difficulties.

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In addition, nearly half of the parents had between two and five years of caregiving experience (46.9%), suggesting that many participants had already spent a considerable amount of time supporting their child's development and navigating the challenges associated with raising a child with ASD.

3.2. Caregiver Burnout among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The level of caregiver burnout among parents was assessed using **eight indicators**. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Level of caregiver burnout among parents (N = 98)

No.	Indicators	Mean	SD
1	Feeling exhausted when caring for the child	3.62	0.88
2	Feeling overwhelmed by caregiving responsibilities	3.58	0.91
3	Lack of energy to continue caregiving activities	3.41	0.93
4	Difficulty controlling emotions in challenging caregiving situations	3.27	0.95
5	Lack of personal time	3.76	0.84
6	Prolonged stress during caregiving	3.64	0.89
7	Feeling exhausted and unwilling to engage in other activities	3.45	0.92
8	Pressure when the child exhibits challenging behaviors	3.52	0.90

The survey results indicate that parents of children with ASD experienced a relatively moderate level of caregiver burnout (Mean = 3.53). This finding suggests that caring for a child with ASD may impose considerable emotional, psychological, and time-related demands on parents.

Among the indicators examined, lack of personal time (Mean = 3.76) received the highest average score. This finding reflects the reality that many parents devote most of their time to caring for and supporting their children, leaving limited opportunities for rest or engagement in personal activities. Additionally, indicators such as prolonged stress during caregiving (Mean = 3.64) and emotional exhaustion (Mean = 3.62) were also reported at relatively high levels.

Findings from the in-depth interviews further revealed that many parents experienced emotional exhaustion due to the continuous challenges associated with caregiving. One parent shared:

"There are days when I feel extremely tired. My child sometimes shows behaviors that are difficult to manage, and I have to closely monitor him almost all day. Sometimes I feel completely exhausted, but I still have to keep going."(N.T.T.H, 36 years old, Hanoi)

In addition, several parents mentioned feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities involved in caring for their children. Beyond meeting their children's daily living needs, parents are also required to participate in intervention activities, skill training, and coordination with teachers or therapists. Another participant shared:

"After work, I spend almost all my time with my child. I take him to intervention sessions, and when we get home, I still have to practice additional skills with him. Sometimes it feels very overwhelming." (P.T.H.N, 40 years old)

These accounts suggest that caregiver burnout arises not only from the workload associated with caregiving but also from prolonged psychological pressure and concerns about the child's developmental progress.

3.3. Psychological Counseling Needs of Parents of Children with ASD to Reduce Caregiver Burnout

Parents' psychological counseling needs were assessed through six support dimensions, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Psychological counseling needs of parents (N = 98)

No.	Support needs	Mean	SD
1	Sharing emotions with a psychological counselor	3.71	0.86
2	Guidance from experts on reducing caregiving stress	3.85	0.82
3	Learning parenting experiences from other parents	3.68	0.87
4	Guidance on adjusting parental expectations for the child	3.74	0.84
5	Sharing emotions with other parents	3.79	0.83
6	Learning stress coping skills	3.88	0.81

The results indicate that parents of children with ASD reported relatively high needs for psychological counseling services (Mean = 3.77). This finding suggests that most parents in the study recognized the importance of receiving psychological support during the caregiving process. Among the surveyed needs, the highest-rated items were learning stress coping skills (Mean = 3.88) and receiving guidance on how to reduce stress during caregiving (Mean = 3.85). These findings indicate that the psychological pressures experienced by parents extend beyond practical challenges related to childcare and education, encompassing ongoing emotional stress associated with long-term caregiving.

Caring for a child with ASD often requires substantial patience, time, and resources from families. Parents must not only support their children in daily living activities but also actively participate in therapeutic interventions, skill training, and collaboration with teachers and specialists. This process may continue for many years and is often accompanied by concerns about the child's progress and long-term future. In such a context, the need for effective stress management and emotional regulation becomes particularly important for parents.

Findings from the in-depth interviews further revealed that many parents felt they lacked appropriate support channels through which they could share their psychological difficulties. Some parents reported that they often had to cope with negative emotions such as anxiety, exhaustion, and feelings of overload on their own, without sufficient opportunities to be heard or supported. One participant stated: "Sometimes I feel very stressed

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but don't know who to talk to. My family members are busy, and not everyone among my friends truly understands my situation. If there were a psychologist who could guide me on how to reduce stress, it would probably make me feel much lighter." (H.T.M, 26 years old, Hanoi)

These reflections indicate that parents not only require information related to caring for and supporting children with ASD but also seek psychologically safe spaces where they can express their emotions and receive professional guidance. This finding also reflects the reality that parents of children with ASD may experience social isolation, particularly when they feel that people around them may not fully understand the pressures they face.

In addition to individual counseling, the study also revealed a considerable interest among parents in participating in peer support groups (Mean = 3.79). Such groups are viewed as environments where parents can share caregiving experiences, receive empathy from others facing similar challenges, and learn coping strategies for dealing with caregiving difficulties. One father participating in the study shared: "When I meet other parents whose children have similar conditions, I feel that I am no longer alone. We share many useful experiences, from teaching strategies to ways of maintaining emotional stability."

(N.V.K, 32 years old, Hanoi)

These accounts suggest that parent support groups not only function as platforms for information exchange but also serve as important sources of emotional support that help parents reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen their capacity to cope with caregiving challenges. When parents connect with families facing similar situations, they may experience greater empathy, which can reinforce their confidence and motivation throughout their parenting journey.

Overall, the findings indicate that the psychological counseling needs of parents of children with ASD arise not only from the challenges associated with caregiving but also from the need to maintain long-term psychological well-being and adaptive capacity. These results suggest that support programs for families of children with ASD should place greater emphasis on psychological support for parents, including professional counseling services, peer support groups, and training programs focused on stress management skills. When parents receive adequate psychological support, they are better able to maintain emotional stability and continue effectively supporting their child's development.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience a relatively high level of caregiver burnout, with an overall mean score of 3.53/5. This result suggests that caring for children with ASD may impose substantial psychological pressures on parents. Among the examined indicators, lack of personal time, emotional exhaustion, and prolonged caregiving stress were the most prominent manifestations. These findings are consistent with previous international studies showing that parents of children with ASD often face long-term caregiving burdens that may lead to emotional and psychological depletion (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012).

One of the key factors contributing to parental burnout is the special caregiving demands associated with ASD. Children with ASD often experience significant difficulties in communication, behavior regulation, and social adaptation. As a result, parents are required to devote considerable time and effort to supporting therapeutic interventions, educational activities, and daily caregiving tasks. These responsibilities may continue for many years and often require substantial patience and family resources. Hayes and Watson (2013) suggest that parents of children with ASD tend to experience higher levels of stress compared to parents of typically developing children due to the challenges of managing difficult behaviors, concerns about the child's future, and the pressures involved in accessing appropriate intervention services.

In addition, the findings reveal that parents reported relatively high levels of need for psychological counseling services, with an overall mean score of 3.77/5. In particular, the needs related to learning stress coping skills, receiving guidance on reducing caregiving stress, and sharing emotional experiences with other parents were rated highly. This suggests that parents require not only information and practical caregiving skills but also emotional support and psychological well-being assistance.

These findings are consistent with previous research on the role of psychological counseling in supporting parents of children with ASD. Pottie and Ingram (2008) argue that psychological support programs can help parents develop effective coping strategies for managing stress and improving mental well-being. Similarly, Blackledge and Hayes (2006) demonstrate that psychological interventions based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) may help parents reduce stress and enhance their ability to adapt to caregiving challenges.

Another noteworthy finding is that many parents expressed interest in participating in peer support groups. Such groups provide opportunities for parents to share caregiving experiences, receive empathy, and learn coping strategies from others who face similar challenges. Previous studies have shown that social support plays an important role in reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing adaptive capacity among parents of children with ASD (Rivard et al., 2014).

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that developing psychological support programs for parents of children with ASD is highly necessary. These programs may include individual counseling, parent support groups, stress management training, and mental health promotion activities. When parents receive adequate psychological support, they are more likely to adapt effectively to caregiving challenges, thereby improving both the effectiveness of interventions for children and the overall quality of life of the family.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine caregiver burnout and psychological counseling needs among parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Hanoi, Vietnam, through a survey of 98 parents who were directly caring for children with ASD. The findings indicate that parents experience a moderate-to-high level of caregiver burnout, with prominent manifestations including emotional exhaustion, feelings of overload, and lack of personal time. These findings highlight the considerable psychological pressures that parents may experience during the process of caring for and supporting the development of children with ASD.

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In addition, parents reported relatively high needs for psychological counseling services, particularly in relation to receiving guidance on stress reduction, learning stress coping strategies, and participating in peer support groups. These findings suggest that parents require not only informational and caregiving support but also emotional and psychological assistance.

Based on these findings, the development of psychological support programs for parents of children with ASD is highly recommended. Such programs may include individual counseling services, parent support groups, and training activities focused on stress management skills. When parents receive sufficient psychological support, they are better able to adapt to caregiving challenges, which may contribute to improved intervention outcomes and enhanced quality of life for the entire family.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

The author has over eight years of experience teaching undergraduate students majoring in Social Work, specializing in subjects such as Social Work with Children, Group Social Work, and Inclusive Education…. In addition to teaching, the author has twelve years of hands-on experience providing psychosocial support for children with developmental disorders and their families, including those with autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, and language impairments. This combination of academic expertise and practical experience enables the author to make meaningful contributions to both student training and the quality of interventions for vulnerable populations in society.

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