

# The Counseling Needs of Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder at Selected Special Education Centers in Hanoi

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**Abstract:** *Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often face significant psychological pressures, including anxiety, depression, stress, and feelings of social stigma. Counseling plays an essential role in helping parents relieve emotional distress, develop coping skills, and enhance their capacity for caregiving and education. This study was conducted at three special education centers in Hanoi with the participation of 78 parents to examine their counseling needs. A survey instrument was developed, consisting of 25 Likert-scale items and three open-ended questions, to assess five areas of need: emotional support, informational and guidance counseling, parenting skills counseling, stigma reduction and social isolation support, and preferred counseling formats. Findings indicate a high overall demand for counseling (mean score of 4.12/5), with particular emphasis on parenting skill counseling for home-based care, followed by counseling to alleviate anxiety and depression. Qualitative analysis further highlights significant challenges faced by parents, including social stigma, financial burdens, and the lack of coordinated and professional multidisciplinary services. The article proposes several solutions, including the development of integrated counseling services at educational centers, the establishment of parent support groups, and policy advocacy to better support families of children with ASD in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** Counseling Needs, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Special Education Centers

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## 1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulties in social communication, repetitive and stereotyped behaviors, and restricted interests. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder in children worldwide is approximately 1 in 100, and this figure shows an increasing trend in many countries. This rapid growth not only poses significant challenges to healthcare and education systems but also places a considerable burden on families—particularly parents—who are directly responsible for nurturing, caring for, and educating the child.

In Vietnam, although comprehensive national statistics are not yet available, reports from the health and education sectors indicate that the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder is steadily increasing, particularly in major cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. This upward trend highlights an urgent need for early intervention services, specialized education, and psychosocial support for families with children on the autism

spectrum. However, the current service system remains insufficient to fully meet the diverse needs of these families, with a lack of multidisciplinary collaboration and strong intersectoral connections. As a result, many parents face significant psychological and practical pressures in the process of caring for their children.

International studies have shown that parents of children with autism spectrum disorder frequently experience stress, anxiety, depression, feelings of guilt, and burnout (Hayes & Watson, 2013; Lai et al., 2015). These negative experiences not only affect parents' mental health and overall quality of life but also indirectly influence the effectiveness of interventions and the child's developmental outcomes. In addition, many parents report facing barriers in accessing healthcare, education, and counseling services, while also confronting social stigma and a lack of community support networks (Hartley & Schultz, 2014; Zorcec & Petkovska, 2020).

In this context, the need for psychological counseling for parents of children with autism spectrum disorder has become an urgent issue. Counseling not only helps parents alleviate negative emotions and reduce stress but also equips them with essential knowledge and coping skills, thereby enhancing their ability to care for their child and maintain family balance. Research has demonstrated that psychological counseling and family support programs can strengthen parents' self-efficacy, reduce stress, and improve family cohesion (Da Paz & Wallander, 2017; Kiami & Goodgold, 2017).

However, in Vietnam, research on the counseling needs of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder remains limited. Existing studies primarily focus on intervention characteristics or the general challenges faced by families, while the specific counseling needs of parents have not been thoroughly or systematically examined. Therefore, this study aims to explore the counseling needs of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder at specialized education centers in Hanoi, thereby providing practical evidence to enhance counseling services, strengthen parental support capacity, and serve as a foundation for policy development to support families of children with autism spectrum disorder in the Vietnamese context.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1 Participants**

The study participants consisted of 78 parents (60 mothers and 18 fathers) of children with autism spectrum disorder who were receiving intervention at three specialized education centers in Hanoi. The parents had an average age of 35.8 years (ranging from 25 to 50). The children ranged in age from 2 to 15 years, with levels of severity varying from mild to severe.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of subjects (N = 78)**

No.	Demographic information	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	<b>Gender</b>		
	Female	60	76,9
	Male	18	23,1
2	<b>Education level</b>		
	High school	15	19,2
	College/University	48	61,5
	Postgraduate	15	19,2
3	<b>Average income/month</b>		
	5–10 million	42	53,8
	10–15 million	24	30,8
	> 15million	12	15,4

## 2.2 Research Instruments

The questionnaire comprised 25 Likert-scale items (rated from 1 to 5) covering five categories of needs: (1) emotional support counseling needs, (2) information and guidance needs, (3) parenting skill counseling needs, (4) counseling needs for reducing stigma and social isolation, and (5) preferred counseling formats. In addition, three open-ended questions were included to explore the most urgent needs, preferred counseling formats, and barriers to accessing services. The instrument demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of 0.89.

The survey was administered in person using printed questionnaires at the centers, with clear explanations provided regarding the study’s purpose and assurances of confidentiality. Data were analyzed using SPSS 26, employing descriptive statistics and group comparisons, along with content analysis for the open-ended responses.

## 3. Research Findings

### 3.1 Assessment of Counseling Needs of Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The study revealed that the counseling needs of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder at specialized education centers in Hanoi are both high and diverse. The findings on parents’ counseling needs are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Counseling needs of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder**

No.	Needs group	Number of items	N	Mean (M)	SD
1	Emotional support (reducing anxiety, depression, self-blame, managing emotions, building confidence)	5	78	4.32	0.52
2	Information and orientation (knowledge about autism spectrum disorder, services, rights, future planning)	5	78	4.25	0.47
3	Parenting skills (behavior management, emotional bonding, family relationships, psychological recovery)	5	78	4.38	0.49
4	Reducing stigma and social isolation (coping with stigma, parent support groups, raising community awareness, reducing loneliness, self-protection)	5	78	4.05	0.58
5	Counseling formats (face-to-face, parent groups, online, regular sessions, skills training)	5	78	3.90	0.60

The survey results indicate that parents generally reported a high level of counseling needs ( $M = 4.12/5$ ). Among the categories, counseling on parenting skills was rated the highest ( $M = 4.38$ ), followed by psychological support to reduce anxiety and depression ( $M = 4.32$ ), and access to accurate information and guidance regarding autism spectrum disorder ( $M = 4.25$ ). Other areas, such as support in reducing stigma and social isolation ( $M = 4.05$ ) and preferences for counseling formats ( $M = 3.90$ ), were also rated relatively high.

First and foremost, the findings indicate that parents' highest counseling need is learning effective parenting skills to support their children at home ( $M = 4.38$ ). This is a significant observation, as challenging behaviors in children with autism spectrum disorder have long been identified as one of the primary stressors for parents (Ludlow et al., 2012; Brobst et al., 2009). Qualitative responses such as, *"I really need someone to guide me on how to handle my child's emotional outbursts"* and *"I want to learn how to communicate and teach my child"* reflect parents' desire for counseling that focuses on practical skill application rather than general theoretical advice. These findings suggest that counseling programs should be designed with a strong emphasis on practice-based approaches, incorporating skill training to address parents' most pressing needs.

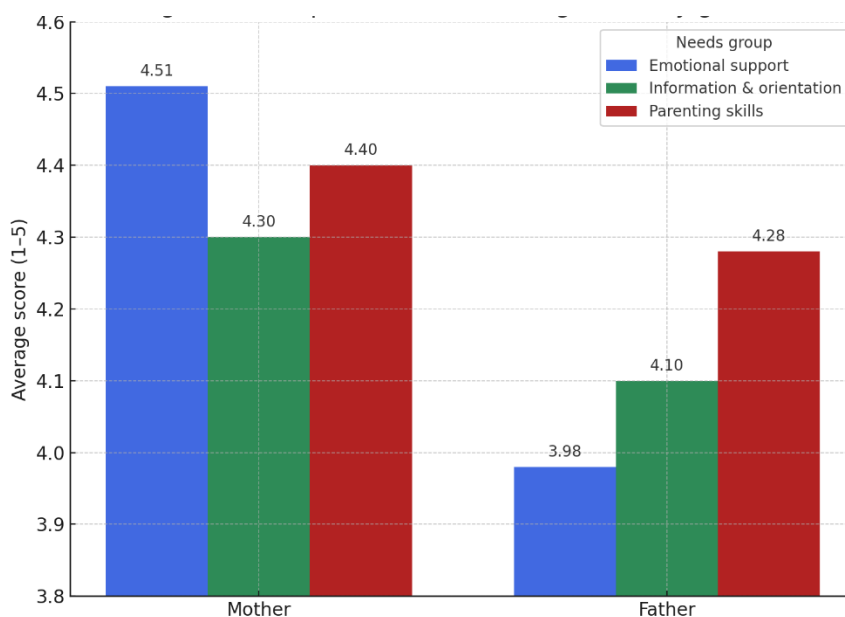
The second most prominent need identified was emotional support to reduce anxiety and depression ( $M = 4.32$ ). Many parents in the study expressed feelings of helplessness, exhaustion, and isolation, as illustrated by statements such as, *"There are times when I just want to cry because I feel powerless with my child,"* *"This battle feels endless, and there have been many times when I felt tired and wanted to give up,"* and *"I have had three suicidal thoughts, and to this day, I still don't know how I managed to overcome them."* This aligns with the findings of Hayes and Watson (2013), who reported that parents of children with autism spectrum disorder experience anxiety and depression at rates two to three times higher than parents of typically developing children. The results are also consistent with Bonis (2016), who emphasized that the prolonged demands of caring for a child with autism are strong predictors of parental burnout and mental health decline.

The third most significant need identified was access to accurate information about autism ( $M = 4.25$ ). A lack of reliable information often leaves parents feeling anxious and uncertain. In the past, parents frequently struggled to find official resources, particularly books and articles in Vietnamese related to autism spectrum disorder. Although today's parents have easier access to information through books, media, and the internet, the primary challenge they face is information overload, making it difficult to distinguish credible sources. One father shared, *"I don't know which information I can trust; sometimes searching online only makes me more confused."* This finding is consistent with Legg (2019), who emphasized that parents need clear, understandable, and consistent information from professionals, especially during the diagnostic and intervention planning stages. It also highlights the crucial role of counselors as information mediators, bridging the gap between families and service systems.

Regarding counseling formats, parents of children with autism spectrum disorder expressed the strongest preference for face-to-face counseling. One parent explained this preference by sharing: *"I found that during my child's intervention at the center, I received the most valuable support in terms of information sharing, guidance, and emotional encouragement when I had direct conversations with the program manager."*

### 3.2 Differences in Counseling Needs by Gender and Age

According to the findings from the three specialized centers in Hanoi, the counseling needs of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder varied by gender and age. These differences are illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Comparison of Counseling Needs by Gender**

When analyzing counseling needs by gender, the data show that mothers reported a higher demand for emotional support compared to fathers ( $M = 4.51$  vs.  $3.98$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). In contrast, fathers placed greater emphasis on financial and social support. As one father shared, *“What I worry about most is the long-term cost—how to ensure that we have the means for our child to continue receiving intervention.”* These findings reflect cultural and social norms in which mothers often assume the primary caregiving role, while fathers tend to focus more on economic responsibilities. This aligns with Hartley (2014), who noted that mothers have more unmet needs related to emotional well-being and rest, whereas fathers are more concerned with practical and financial support.

The age-based analysis showed that parents under 35 reported higher needs for information and coping skills ( $M = 4.25$  vs.  $3.95$ ). Younger parents often have less experience and may feel overwhelmed when confronted with their child’s autism diagnosis. One young mother shared, *“I feel inexperienced; everything is new to me, so I need more specific guidance.”* In contrast, parents who have been caring for their child for more than three years reported greater needs for stress management and psychological resilience, reflecting the cumulative pressure of long-term caregiving. This finding is consistent with Rivard (2014), who highlighted that prolonged caregiving increases stress levels and the demand for psychological support.

In addition, the qualitative analysis revealed that social stigma and a shortage of specialized counseling services are major barriers preventing parents from easily accessing support. Current centers tend to focus on general advice rather than providing ongoing guidance and skill training. As one mother shared, *“It is very difficult to find a counselor who truly understands autism; most only provide general advice.”* This observation reinforces the findings of Zorcec (2020), which noted that many families of children with autism in

developing countries face limited access to appropriate professional services and encounter significant barriers to social support.

A noteworthy contribution of this study is its emphasis on the barriers and expectations expressed by parents. Responses to the open-ended questions highlighted three primary barriers: social stigma, financial burdens, and a lack of specialized services. These challenges are consistent with the findings of Zorcec (2020) and Kiami (2017), which noted that many parents in developing countries face significant difficulties in accessing quality support services and often confront social prejudice. At the same time, parents' expectations were also clear: counseling should be highly practical, skill-focused, and provide tangible emotional support.

By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the study confirmed that the counseling needs of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder are not only high in intensity but also diverse in content. Moreover, these needs are influenced by factors such as gender, age, caregiving experience, and real-world barriers.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the counseling needs of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder at specialized education centers in Hanoi are both substantial and diverse. The findings highlight that parents' greatest need is learning skills for managing their child's behavior, followed by reducing anxiety and depression, and accessing accurate information about autism. Furthermore, differences based on gender, age, and caregiving experience reflect the heterogeneous nature of parents' needs: mothers typically require more emotional support, while fathers place greater emphasis on financial and social assistance; younger parents prioritize information and skills, whereas those with longer caregiving experience focus more on stress management.

In addition, the qualitative findings highlighted significant barriers to accessing counseling, including social stigma, financial burdens, and a shortage of specialized professionals. They also reflected parents' expectations for counseling services to be practical, skill-oriented, and available in formats such as face-to-face sessions or peer support groups. These findings are consistent with international studies while contributing empirical evidence within the Vietnamese context, where social support systems for families of children with autism spectrum disorder remain limited.

Based on these findings, the authors propose the following recommendations:

i. For specialized education centers:

- Integrate psychological counseling services for parents alongside children's intervention programs.
- Develop skill-training courses for parents focused on behavior management and communication, emphasizing practical application and real-life scenarios.
- Establish peer-support groups for parents to reduce feelings of isolation and encourage experience sharing.

- ii. For professionals (social workers, psychologists, and special education specialists):
  - Develop specialized counseling programs for parents of children with autism spectrum disorder, combining emotional support with skill training.
  - Implement a variety of counseling formats (individual, group, and online) to enhance flexibility and accessibility.
  - Strengthen training for counselors with in-depth knowledge of autism to better meet parents' specific needs.
- iii. For policymakers:
  - Increase financial support for families of children with autism spectrum disorder through subsidies, health insurance coverage, and social welfare policies.
  - Launch community awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and improve public understanding of autism.
  - Invest in the development of social work and psychological counseling services within schools, hospitals, and community centers to provide sustainable support for parents.

Overall, this study not only confirms the urgent need for counseling among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder but also introduces new approaches to building multidimensional support services that are culturally sensitive and responsive to individual needs. These findings provide a foundation for developing appropriate policies, intervention programs, and professional practices, contributing to improved mental health and quality of life for families raising children with autism in Vietnam.

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