

Psychosocial Support Needs of Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Study in Hanoi

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Abstract: *Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) constitute a population exposed to prolonged psychosocial stress due to the continuous demands of caregiving and intervention. This study aims to analyze the psychosocial support needs of parents of children with ASD in Hanoi, Vietnam, and to propose directions for developing support services tailored to the Vietnamese context. A mixed-methods design was employed, including a survey of 98 parents across four intervention centers and in-depth interviews with nine parents of children with ASD. The findings indicate that support needs cluster around three primary domains: (1) individual psychological counseling, (2) participation in peer support groups, and (3) access to reliable, evidence-based professional information and knowledge. The analysis reveals that these needs are closely interconnected, reflecting the multidimensional nature of chronic stress, social isolation, and informational uncertainty experienced by parents in the context of caring for a child with ASD. The results are consistent with international evidence highlighting the role of counseling, social support, and parental empowerment through capacity building. The study proposes integrated support recommendations that combine individual counseling, peer-based support networks, and structured information systems grounded in scientific evidence, with the aim of enhancing parental psychological well-being and improving intervention outcomes for children with ASD in Vietnam.*

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, parents, psychosocial support needs, counselling, peer support

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the prevalence of ASD diagnoses has increased over recent decades, reflecting both improvements in diagnostic practices and a genuine rise in identified cases. This upward trend implies that an increasing number of families must adapt to long-term and specialized caregiving demands. In this context, the caregiving burden shifts predominantly to the family, particularly to parents, who serve as primary caregivers and are directly involved in intervention and educational processes. Unlike many other forms of disability, ASD is characterized by its chronicity, unpredictability, and the requirement for continuous intervention, resulting in psychological stress that is not situational but cumulative over time.

A substantial body of international research indicates that parents of children with ASD experience significantly higher levels of stress compared to parents of typically developing children or those with other types of disabilities. Hayes and Watson (2013) demonstrated that parents of children with ASD report statistically higher stress levels than control groups, with this difference remaining consistent across countries and cultural contexts. Similarly, Karst and Van Hecke (2012) emphasized that the impact of ASD extends beyond child behavior to profoundly affect family structure, marital relationships, and parental mental health. Benson (2010) highlighted the chronic nature of parental stress in families of children with ASD and warned of the risk of psychological burnout in the absence of adequate support resources. This study further identified the combination of challenging child behaviors and perceived lack of social support as strong predictors of parental depression. In addition, Lai and Oei (2014), in their review of coping strategies among parents of children with ASD, identified financial strain and family role conflict as factors that exacerbate prolonged stress. Beyond individual-level factors, numerous studies underscore the critical role of social support networks. Gray (2002) found that experiences of stigma and lack of community understanding intensify parents' feelings of social isolation. Smith, Greenberg, and Seltzer (2012) reported that higher levels of social support are positively associated with the psychological well-being of mothers of children with ASD, reinforcing the importance of structured psychosocial support programs.

Taken together, international evidence consistently demonstrates that parents of children with ASD constitute a high-risk group for stress, depression, and psychological burnout, and that they have substantial needs for specialized psychological support services. However, in Vietnam in general and Hanoi in particular, research focusing on parental psychosocial support needs remains limited; the majority of attention has traditionally centered on direct intervention for children. Although the number of intervention centers in Hanoi has expanded rapidly in recent years, psychological support services specifically designed for parents have not yet been developed in a systematic and professional manner. This situation reveals a critical gap within the family support system for children with ASD. While parents play a decisive role in the long-term effectiveness of intervention, they often lack the psychological resources necessary to sustain their own mental health and to effectively accompany their children throughout the intervention process. Therefore, investigating the psychosocial support needs of parents of children with ASD in Hanoi is not only of practical significance but also contributes to the growing body of scientific evidence in the Vietnamese context, providing a foundation for the development of appropriate policies and support programs.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure comprehensiveness and analytical depth in examining the psychosocial support needs of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The quantitative component enabled the research team to measure the prevalence and intensity of various psychosocial support needs within the study population. Simultaneously, the qualitative component provided in-depth insights into parents' lived experiences, emotional responses, and subjective perspectives through semi-structured interviews. The integration of these two methodological approaches enhanced the overall validity and robustness of the findings, while reducing potential biases associated with reliance on a single data source.

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at four intervention and educational centers for children with ASD in Hanoi, Vietnam. These centers provide early intervention services, inclusive education programs, and specialized therapeutic interventions for children diagnosed with ASD.

The quantitative sample consisted of 98 parents whose children had been formally diagnosed with ASD and were enrolled in intervention programs at the selected centers during the period of data collection. Participants were recruited based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) having a child diagnosed with ASD according to professional records; (2) the child had participated in intervention services for at least three months; (3) the parent was directly involved in caregiving and responsible for accompanying the child to intervention sessions; and (4) voluntary consent to participate in the study. A purposive convenience sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants had sustained and practical caregiving experience.

The qualitative sample comprised nine parents selected from the survey participants. These individuals were purposively chosen to represent variation in key characteristics, including duration of the child’s intervention, family socioeconomic status, and educational background, thereby allowing for a diverse range of perspectives in the in-depth analysis.

2.3. Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative Survey Questionnaire

Data for the quantitative component were collected a self-administered questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale (1 = no need at all; 5 = very high need). The questionnaire was developed based on: (1) a review of international literature on psychosocial difficulties and support services for parents of children with ASD; (2) existing measurement scales assessing support needs among families of children with disabilities; and (3) contextual adaptation to ensure cultural relevance within the Vietnamese setting. The instrument consisted of three primary domains: Need for individual psychological counseling; Need for participation in peer support groups; Need for access to information provision, skills training, and online support services.

Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine parents. The interview guide focused on: (1) experiences of stress and psychological pressure; (2) strategies for seeking support; (3) barriers encountered in accessing services; and (4) expectations regarding the psychosocial support system. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants’ informed consent. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Need for Individual Psychological Counseling

The survey results from 98 parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Hanoi indicate that the need for individual psychological counseling is both high and urgent.

Table 1: Need for Individual Psychological Counseling among Parents of Children with ASD (N = 98)

No.	Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Parents wish to receive monthly individual counseling	76	77.6
2	Parents wish to receive counseling whenever they feel overwhelmed	81	82.7

3	Parents have previously wanted counseling but were unable to access appropriate services	54	55.1
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The findings show that 82.7% of parents reported a need for counseling support when experiencing psychological overload. This notably high proportion suggests that stress is not sporadic but has become a common and recurring experience in the caregiving process. Additionally, 77.6% of parents expressed a desire for regular individual counseling, indicating a clear need to be heard and to receive in-depth, personalized professional support. Importantly, more than half of the participants (55.1%) reported that they had previously sought psychological support but were unable to obtain appropriate services. This finding highlights a significant gap between existing service provision and actual parental needs. Such a service gap may contribute to cumulative stress and increase the risk of psychological burnout. The qualitative interviews reinforced these quantitative findings. One mother shared: *“There are times when I truly cannot cope anymore. I just want someone to listen to me, but I don’t know where to find that. People simply tell me to try harder, but I need someone who genuinely understands the issue.”* (P.T.H., 34 years old)

Another parent stated: *“I once went to a private counseling clinic, but they did not really understand autism. The advice I received did not feel appropriate, so I stopped going because I felt my needs were not properly addressed.”* (N.V.M., 38 years old)

These accounts suggest that parents require more than general emotional reassurance; they need specialized counseling services grounded in professional knowledge of ASD, particularly regarding behavioral challenges, communication difficulties, and the long-term caregiving burden. These findings are consistent with international research. Benson (2010) emphasized that parental stress in families of children with ASD is chronic and may lead to depression if adequate support resources are lacking. Hayes and Watson (2013), in their meta-analysis of 19 studies, confirmed that parents of children with ASD experience significantly higher stress levels compared to parents of typically developing children, and underscored the role of psychological intervention in stress reduction. Similarly, Karst and Van Hecke (2012) argued that psychological support programs for parents not only improve parental mental health but also positively influence child intervention outcomes. This suggests that individual counseling support is not merely a mental health service for parents but also an indirect mechanism for enhancing developmental progress in children with ASD.

From an ecological perspective, parents of children with ASD are simultaneously influenced by multiple systems, including family, community, and policy environments. When support at the microsystem level, such as individual counseling, is insufficient, parents’ adaptive capacity may decline, leading to cascading effects across other systemic levels. Therefore, the findings from Hanoi indicate that the need for individual psychological counseling is a prominent and priority concern. The development of specialized counseling services with in-depth expertise in ASD is essential to reduce accumulated stress and prevent psychological burnout among parents.

3.2. Need for Participation in Peer Support Groups

In addition to the need for individual counseling, the findings indicate a high and practically significant demand for participation in peer support groups among parents of children with ASD in Hanoi. Peer support groups are conceptualized as spaces in which parents can share experiences, receive empathy, and learn coping strategies from families facing similar circumstances.

Table 2: Need for Participation in Peer Support Groups (N = 98)

No.	Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Desire to participate in online peer parent groups	72	73.5
2	Desire to participate in in-person peer parent groups	61	62.2
3	Desire for a safe space to share emotions	78	79.6

The results show that 73.5% of parents expressed a desire to participate in small online peer groups, while 62.2% preferred in-person group participation. These findings reflect a clear need for social connection across both modalities of support. Notably, 79.6% of respondents indicated a desire for a safe space to express emotions, whether within general parent groups or professionally facilitated groups involving specialists knowledgeable about ASD-related caregiving. These indicators suggest that the demand for peer support groups and safe sharing environments arises not only from the need for information exchange but also from the need for emotional support and relief from social isolation. Qualitative interview data further elucidate the meaning behind these statistical patterns. One parent shared: *“I think if there were a group of parents like me, the pressure would be much lighter. Sometimes just hearing that others have gone through the same thing makes me feel relieved.”* (L.T.A., 35 years old). Another mother stated: *“I hesitate to talk to people outside because they don’t understand. But with parents who also have a child with autism, it’s easier to open up.”* (H.T.M., 40 years old)

These narratives highlight that empathy grounded in shared lived experience plays a central role in parents’ motivation to participate in peer support groups. The findings align with international evidence. Gray (2002) argued that stigma and lack of community understanding contribute to social withdrawal among parents of children with ASD. In the absence of formal and informal support networks, parents are at risk of prolonged social isolation. Smith, Greenberg, and Seltzer (2012) demonstrated that higher levels of social support are positively associated with better psychological well-being among mothers of children with ASD. The authors emphasized the protective function of social support networks in buffering the effects of chronic stress and preventing burnout. Similarly, Karst and Van Hecke (2012) reported that parent group interventions not only reduce stress but also enhance child intervention outcomes by strengthening parental coping skills and self-efficacy.

From an ecological systems perspective, peer support groups function as a resource at the microsystem and mesosystem levels, enhancing parents’ social capital and adaptive capacity in the face of long-term caregiving pressures. The difference in preference between online (73.5%) and in-person groups (62.2%) reflects increasing flexibility in support modalities within contemporary contexts. Parents often face time constraints and geographic limitations, making online formats more accessible and convenient. Nevertheless, in-person groups remain crucial for fostering deeper emotional bonds and sustained interpersonal connections.

Overall, the need for peer support groups among parents of children with ASD in Hanoi appears to be structurally rooted in feelings of loneliness, lack of understanding, and the desire for emotional sharing within safe environments. Developing small, professionally facilitated peer group models, particularly those coordinated by trained social workers, represents a necessary and sustainable strategy to address these needs in a systematic and professional manner.

3.3. Need for Information and Knowledge Provision

In addition to the need for individual counseling and participation in peer support groups, the findings indicate that the demand for access to reliable information and professional knowledge

about ASD represents the most prominent and highest-rated category among the surveyed support needs.

Table 3: Need for Information and Knowledge Provision (N = 98)

No.	Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Desire for official and reliable information about ASD	84	85.7
2	Desire for training in home-based behavior management skills	79	80.6
3	Desire for clear guidance regarding long-term intervention planning	67	68.4
4	Desire for access to online instructional materials	74	75.5
5	Need for guidance in distinguishing accurate from misleading online information	59	60.2

The results show that 85.7% of parents expressed a desire for official and trustworthy information about ASD - the highest proportion across all categories of assessed needs. This finding reflects the reality that many parents continue to face challenges in accessing accurate, systematic, and contextually relevant sources of information. Furthermore, 80.6% of parents reported a need for training in behavior management strategies at home. This indicates that informational needs extend beyond theoretical understanding and are strongly oriented toward practical application. Parents seek to be equipped with knowledge and skills that enable them to actively participate in the intervention process rather than relying solely on specialized centers. Notably, 60.2% of parents reported difficulty distinguishing accurate from misleading information available online. This figure highlights the risks of “information overload” and “informational ambiguity” in the current digital era, particularly in the field of ASD, where multiple intervention approaches exist, not all of which are supported by robust scientific evidence. The qualitative interviews provide further insight into this need. One father explained: *“I read a lot online, but the more I read, the more confused I become. One person says to follow this method, another recommends something completely different. I don’t know which one is correct.”* (L.V., 33 years old)

These accounts suggest that the need for information is not solely driven by curiosity or knowledge acquisition but also by a desire to regain a sense of control and reduce anxiety. When parents clearly understand their child’s condition and the long-term direction of intervention, levels of uncertainty - a central factor contributing to chronic stress - tend to decrease. These findings are consistent with international research. Karst and Van Hecke (2012) emphasized that clear information provision and skills training are essential components of family support programs for children with ASD. Benson and Karlof (2009) reported that greater parental understanding of the child’s condition and higher perceived caregiving competence are negatively associated with parental stress levels. Additionally, Lai and Oei (2014) argued that effective coping strategies among parents are significantly influenced by access to appropriate information and skills training. In the absence of reliable information, parents may turn to unverified sources, thereby increasing anxiety and psychological instability.

Overall, the need for information and knowledge provision among parents of children with ASD in Hanoi appears to be foundational, directly influencing psychological adaptation and intervention effectiveness. Establishing standardized information systems, providing practical skills training, and developing scientifically validated online instructional materials are therefore urgent priorities in the current context.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the psychosocial support needs of parents of children with ASD in Hanoi are multidimensional and structurally interconnected, encompassing the need for individual counseling, participation in peer support groups, and access to professional information and knowledge. The high proportion of parents expressing a desire for support when experiencing psychological overload reflects the chronic nature of stress in the context of caring for a child with ASD. This is consistent with the meta-analytic findings of Hayes and Watson (2013), which demonstrate that parents of children with ASD experience significantly higher stress levels compared to other parent groups. Benson (2010) further emphasized that stress in this population is chronic and, in the absence of appropriate support resources, increases the risk of depression and psychological burnout. The fact that more than half of the parents in this study had previously sought psychological support but were unable to access appropriate services reveals a clear imbalance between existing service provision and actual needs.

Beyond individual-level difficulties, the findings also reflect a notable deficiency in social support networks, as a considerable proportion of parents reported feelings of loneliness throughout their caregiving journey. This observation aligns with Gray's (2002) analysis of the impact of social stigma on parents of children with ASD and with the findings of Smith, Greenberg, and Seltzer (2012), who identified social support as a critical protective factor for parental psychological well-being. From an ecological systems perspective, peer support groups may function as an intermediary-level resource within the broader social system, strengthening social connections, reducing isolation, and enhancing psychological adaptability in response to long-term caregiving pressures.

In addition to emotional and social support, the high demand for reliable information and practical skills training indicates parents' desire for empowerment through increased competence and autonomy. Karst and Van Hecke (2012) demonstrated that parent training programs yield dual benefits: improving parental mental health and enhancing child intervention outcomes. Similarly, Benson and Karlof (2009) reported an inverse relationship between parents' understanding of their child's condition and their level of stress. In the context of rapid digital expansion, information overload may itself become a secondary source of stress, further underscoring the necessity of standardized, evidence-based informational resources.

Overall, the three identified categories of needs do not exist independently but rather constitute an integrated support system. Individual counseling contributes to emotional regulation and psychological stabilization; peer support groups strengthen social resources and reduce isolation; and information provision and skills training enhance parental competence and self-efficacy. The convergence between the findings in Hanoi and international evidence suggests that the psychosocial support needs of parents of children with ASD represent a universal concern. Nevertheless, support systems must be designed and implemented in ways that are culturally responsive and aligned with the specific service infrastructure and socio-cultural context of Vietnam.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Parents of children with ASD in Hanoi demonstrate a high demand for psychosocial support, particularly in the areas of individual counseling, skills training, and peer support groups.

Establishing a professional and integrated support system - combining both in-person and online modalities - is essential to reduce stress, enhance adaptive capacity, and improve intervention outcomes for children. Overall, the recommendations of this study emphasize that psychosocial support for parents of children with ASD should be implemented through an integrated, multi-level, and sustainable approach. When parents receive adequate support, they not only improve their own psychological well-being but also become a critical resource in their child's developmental trajectory.

Based on the findings regarding the needs for individual counseling, peer support participation, and access to information and knowledge among parents of children with ASD in Hanoi, this study proposes recommendations at three levels: professional service provision, system organization, and policy development.

Development of Specialized Counseling Services for Parents of Children with ASD

Given that more than 80% of parents reported a need for support when experiencing psychological overload, and over half had previously sought help without receiving appropriate services, it is evident that a significant gap remains in the provision of psychological counseling services for parents of children with ASD. Therefore, the development of specialized counseling programs within intervention centers is urgently needed. These programs should be delivered by professionals with in-depth expertise in ASD and a comprehensive understanding of the psychological characteristics of families raising children with ASD to ensure contextual and professional relevance. Counseling content should focus on chronic stress reduction, prevention of psychological burnout, and the application of evidence-based approaches such as cognitive-behavioral techniques, emotional regulation training, and self-care strategy development. Importantly, counseling services should not be implemented in isolation but rather integrated into the child's overall intervention process, recognizing parents as a central component of the support ecosystem. Supporting parents' mental health not only enhances their individual well-being but also indirectly contributes to improved child intervention outcomes, as demonstrated in international research (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012).

Development of Professionally Facilitated Peer Support Group Models

In addition to individual counseling, establishing small peer support groups of 6–10 parents, facilitated by trained social workers or mental health professionals, represents a necessary strategy to strengthen social support resources for parents of children with ASD. These groups should be structured as safe spaces where parents can share emotions, experiences, and caregiving challenges without fear of judgment. Group sessions should follow clearly structured thematic modules, such as behavior management, parental mental health care, coping with social stigma, or long-term intervention planning, to ensure both professional rigor and practical effectiveness. A hybrid model combining in-person and online formats would enhance accessibility, particularly for parents facing time constraints or mobility limitations. Peer support groups serve not only as platforms for information exchange but also as mechanisms for reducing social isolation and fostering a sense of mutual understanding—factors consistently identified as protective for parental psychological well-being in international studies (Smith, Greenberg, & Seltzer, 2012).

Standardization of Information Systems and Skills Training

Beyond direct service provision, the establishment of a standardized information system on ASD for parents constitutes a foundational requirement to ensure consistency and reliability in disseminated knowledge. This system should include evidence-based caregiving manuals, home-based intervention guidelines, behavior management resources, concise instructional

videos, and an expert-moderated online question-and-answer platform. Standardizing materials would not only facilitate access to accurate information but also mitigate misinformation and confusion within digital environments. In addition, periodic practical skills training workshops should be organized to allow parents to practice techniques and receive direct feedback from professionals.

In the context of rapid digital transformation, developing integrated online support platforms for parents of children with ASD is both strategic and inevitable. Such platforms may incorporate scheduled online counseling sessions, digital peer support communities, scientifically validated electronic resource libraries, and intervention progress-tracking applications combined with periodic professional consultation. Technological integration optimizes professional resources while expanding service accessibility, particularly for parents constrained by time, mobility, or geographic distance. Moreover, online modalities promote continuity and flexibility in family support, reducing service disruption and enhancing timely responses to emerging psychological challenges.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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