

Psychological Distress Among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder at The Newday Specialized Center System in Hanoi

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Abstract: *This study investigates the psychological difficulties experienced by parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at the Newday Specialized Center in Hanoi, Vietnam. Using a cross-sectional quantitative design, data were collected from 56 parents through a 25-item questionnaire based on the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), covering five symptom domains: anxiety, depression, hostility, somatization, and negative self-evaluation. Results show that over 80% of parents experience moderate to high levels of psychological distress, with anxiety, depression, and negative self-evaluation being the most prominent. Female parents and those under 31 years of age reported higher distress levels. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted psychosocial support programs for parents of children with ASD, including counseling, peer-support groups, and caregiver training. The study also highlights the importance of state-level policies to strengthen mental health and financial support for affected families.*

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), parents, psychological distress, anxiety, depression, Vietnam, psychosocial support

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders in children today. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), approximately 1 in 100 children worldwide is diagnosed with ASD. In Vietnam, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (2022) reports tens of thousands of new ASD diagnoses each year, mostly in children aged 2 to 6. However, early intervention services and psychological counseling for parents remain limited.

Parents serve as the primary caregivers for children with ASD and must cope daily with behavioral challenges, language delays, and uncertainties about their child's future. This often leads to heightened anxiety, depression, and psychological exhaustion. Previous studies (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2004; Hayes & Watson, 2013) have shown that parents of children with ASD experience significantly higher levels of stress and psychological disorders than parents of neurotypical children.

Newday Center is one of the longstanding specialized intervention centers for children with ASD in Hanoi, serving over 300 cases annually. However, there has been no in-depth quantitative study exploring the psychological challenges of parents at this institution. This

research aims to comprehensively investigate such difficulties, providing a foundation for tailored psychosocial support programs for parents of children with ASD.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study is grounded in the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) by Derogatis (1992), which assesses nine psychological symptom dimensions through 53 items, including anxiety, depression, hostility, somatization, interpersonal sensitivity, and negative self-evaluation. Based on this framework, a 25-item questionnaire was developed focusing on five key symptom groups commonly experienced by parents of children with ASD.

International research (e.g., Van Steijn et al., 2014; Hayes & Watson, 2013) has found that parents of children with ASD are 2–3 times more likely to experience anxiety and depression compared to parents of typically developing children. In Vietnam, Nguyen Thi Phuong (2017) revealed that over 30% of mothers of children with ASD exhibited moderate to severe depression. Le Thi Kim Loan (2022) identified that 58% of such parents experienced high levels of caregiver burden, with psychological factors being particularly prominent.

Based on these findings, the present study investigates the following research questions: “*What is the current level of psychological distress among parents of children with ASD at Newday Center? Which symptom groups are most prominent?*” The main hypothesis is: “*Parents of children with ASD at Newday Center exhibit higher levels of anxiety, depression, and negative self-evaluation than other symptom groups.*”

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and Setting: 56 parents (either mother or father) whose children have been diagnosed with ASD and are receiving intervention services at Newday Center during the 2024–2025 academic year.

3.2. Research Design: Cross-sectional quantitative descriptive study.

3.3. Measurement Instrument: A 25-item questionnaire derived from the BSI, covering five domains: Anxiety, Depression, Hostility, Somatization, and Negative Self-Evaluation. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0–4).

3.4. Data Collection Procedure: Questionnaires were distributed in person to parents at the center following a detailed explanation of the study's objectives and assurances of confidentiality.

3.5. Data Analysis: Data were coded and analyzed using Excel and SPSS. The scale's reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.88. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze means and standard deviations, along with demographic subgroup comparisons.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Characteristics

The sample consisted of 56 parents, with approximately 75% being female. The average age was 35.7 years (range: 25–50). Most had completed college or university, with household

incomes ranging from VND 10 –15 million/month. The majority had been caregiving for 1–3 years.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Gender	Age	Education	Income	Care Duration
Female	32	Vocational	10 –15 million	>3 years
Female	38	Postgraduate	10 –15 million	>3 years
Female	47	College/University	5–10 million	1–3 years
Female	49	College/University	10 –15 million	1–3 years
Male	32	Vocational	10 –15 million	1–3 years

4.2. Overall Psychological Distress Levels

Over 80% of participants exhibited moderate to high levels of psychological distress, with anxiety, depression, and negative self-evaluation being the most prominent. The average distress score across all items was 2.54/4 (SD \approx 0.15), indicating consistently high distress levels. Frequent symptoms included worry, sadness, guilt, loss of control, and sleep disturbances, reflecting sustained emotional overload among these parents.

4.3. Analysis by Symptom Group

The 25 items were categorized into five psychological symptom domains. Average scores by group were as follows:

Table 2: Analysis by Symptom Group

Symptom Group	No. of Items	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
Anxiety	5	2.61	0.45
Depression	5	2.56	0.50
Hostility	5	2.48	0.42
Somatization	5	2.51	0.40
Negative Self-Evaluation	5	2.55	0.43

4.4. Demographic Comparisons

Female parents reported higher distress levels than male counterparts (2.59 vs. 2.42), particularly in anxiety and depression domains. Parents under 31 had the highest scores, possibly due to limited caregiving experience. Those who had been caregiving for over 3 years also exhibited elevated scores, suggesting the cumulative effect of prolonged stress.

5. Discussion

These findings align with existing literature. The prominence of anxiety and depression is consistent with the meta-analysis by Hayes & Watson (2013), which found that 33% of ASD parents experienced anxiety disorders and 31% had clinical depression. Nguyen Thi Phuong (2017) similarly noted a 30–40% depression rate among parents in Vietnam.

The heightened distress among younger and female parents underscores the need for targeted interventions. Moreover, symptoms such as guilt, emotional instability, and physical complaints highlight the pervasive impact of caregiving-related stress on overall health.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Parents of children with ASD at Newday Center are experiencing high levels of psychological distress, particularly in anxiety, depression, and negative self-evaluation. These issues significantly affect caregiving quality and parental well-being. Based on these findings, we recommend:

- Implementing regular psychological counseling programs for parents.
- Establishing support groups for parents using peer-sharing and group therapy models.
- Providing training on caregiving skills, stress management, and self-care.
- Enhancing national policies for mental and financial support to ASD families.
- Conducting future mixed-methods research to explore parents' lived experiences more deeply.

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