



Challenges faced by mothers of children with autism and coping strategies: A phenomenological approach

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ABSTRACT

Caring for a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) presents profound and multidimensional challenges that extend beyond the individual child to affect the entire family system, particularly mothers who serve as primary caregivers. Recognizing the limited local research exploring these lived experiences in rural Philippine settings, this study sought to understand the challenges faced and coping mechanisms employed by mothers of children with ASD.

A descriptive phenomenological design was utilized to capture the lived realities of eight purposively selected mothers from the province of Apayao, Philippines. Data were gathered over two months through semi-structured interviews and online questionnaires, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework.

Findings revealed that nearly all mothers experienced intertwined behavioral, emotional, and structural challenges, including persistent communication difficulties, emotional fatigue, and financial strain. Despite these adversities, participants exhibited resilience through faith-based coping, strong family and community support, adaptive caregiving routines, and self-care practices. These results underscore that maternal adaptation is shaped by both individual agency and sociocultural context.

These insights highlight the need for holistic, multi-level interventions that integrate psychosocial, faith-based, and community support systems to strengthen maternal well-being and improve developmental outcomes for children with ASD. Future research should explore broader family dynamics and policy support mechanisms to enhance inclusive care for families affected by autism.

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Introduction

Raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong journey that profoundly affects the

emotional, psychological, and social well-being of families, particularly mothers who serve as primary caregivers. Behavioral and communication challenges demand constant attention, often leading to increased parenting stress, emotional exhaustion, and adverse mental health outcomes among caregivers of children with ASD (Herrero et al., 2024;

Most studies on parenting children with ASD focus on Western and urban contexts with greater access to therapy and support (Lai et al., 2015), leaving families in rural regions underrepresented. In these areas, limited awareness, social stigma, and scarce institutional support make caregiving more challenging (Divinagracia et al., 2020). Filipino mothers also navigate cultural and spiritual expectations, viewing caregiving as both a moral duty and a source of strength, an area that remains underexplored in research (Alampay & Jocson, 2011; Bernardo, 2017).

There is a lack of qualitative studies exploring the lived experiences of mothers in rural Philippine settings. Existing local studies are mostly quantitative, focusing on stress, burden, or coping scales without capturing the depth of maternal experiences.

This study, therefore, explored the lived experiences of mothers raising children with ASD in Apayao, Northern Luzon, using a descriptive phenomenological approach to provide culturally grounded insights to inform policies, support programs, and community-based interventions that promote maternal well-being and family resilience.

Review of related literature and studies

This review aims to contextualize the present study within existing research, focusing on the challenges and coping mechanisms of mothers raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). By examining relevant international and local literature, it identifies current knowledge gaps, establishes a theoretical foundation, and underscores the significance of understanding maternal adaptation in the context of autism caregiving. The review also explores how emotional, social, financial, and cultural factors shape mothers' lived experiences and their capacity to build resilience amid caregiving demands.

Challenges faced by mothers of children with ASD

Mothers of children with ASD experience multidimensional challenges that extend beyond typical caregiving. Scopus-indexed studies consistently report elevated stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among these mothers, primarily due to the demanding nature of caregiving and limited access to professional and community support (Alibekova et al., 2022; Papadopoulos et al., 2021). The psychological distress they experience often arises from the unpredictability of the child's behavior, communication barriers, and persistent fears about the child's future (Dijkstra-de Neijis et al., 2024).

In terms of caregiver burden and quality of life, mothers often report decreased well-being and chronic fatigue, resulting from constant supervision, therapy coordination, and advocacy responsibilities (Patel et al., 2022). Such burdens limit their opportunities for rest, recreation, and social interaction, leading to reduced life satisfaction (van Niekerk et al., 2023). These findings reveal that caregiving for children

with ASD is not only physically taxing but also psychologically demanding, especially in resource-limited contexts.

Financial and practical challenges further compound these struggles. Mothers frequently bear the economic costs of therapies, educational programs, and transportation, while often sacrificing employment to provide full-time care. Studies show that inadequate government support amplifies these economic pressures, leaving families financially vulnerable (Patel et al., 2022).

Social stigma also remains a pervasive issue. Many mothers report being misunderstood or blamed for their child's behavior, resulting in feelings of isolation and social withdrawal (Oliver et al., 2024; Reza et al., 2025). This lack of societal understanding erodes mothers' confidence and limits access to informal social support, which is critical for coping and emotional recovery.

Moreover, family and marital stress are frequently reported. Differences in coping styles between partners, combined with the overwhelming caregiving load, can lead to relationship strain and emotional distance (Papadopoulos et al., 2021). Nonetheless, positive co-parenting and extended family support are shown to buffer the negative impact of caregiving stress.

Another recurring challenge involves service access and system navigation. Long waiting times, expensive therapies, and the shortage of specialized professionals force mothers to assume the role of advocate and coordinator for their child's needs. These systemic barriers intensify feelings of helplessness and frustration, particularly in rural areas where autism services are scarce (Reza et al., 2025).

Coping strategies and maternal resilience

Despite facing numerous challenges, many mothers demonstrate resilience and adaptability through diverse coping strategies. Research categorizes these into problem-focused, emotion-focused, social-support seeking, and avoidance strategies (Curley et al., 2025).

Problem-focused coping involves active strategies such as creating structured routines, implementing behavior-management techniques, pursuing early interventions, and engaging in advocacy for their children. These proactive approaches are linked to reduced stress and enhanced caregiving efficacy when appropriate resources are accessible (Patel et al., 2022).

Emotion-focused coping, which includes acceptance, reframing, and religious or spiritual coping, allows mothers to manage emotional distress when external circumstances cannot be changed. Meaning-making and spirituality help mothers reinterpret caregiving as a purposeful and transformative experience, promoting inner strength and optimism (Papadopoulos et al., 2021).

Social support seeking also plays a vital role in maintaining maternal well-being. Support from family members, peers, and formal organizations provides both emotional relief and practical guidance (Oliver et al., 2024). Participation in parent groups and faith-based communities fosters connection and

decreases feelings of isolation. Access to respite care further contributes to emotional recovery and sustained resilience, although such services remain limited in many settings (Rezq et al., 2025)

In contrast, avoidance, or maladaptive coping—such as denial or emotional withdrawal—is associated with increased stress and poorer psychological outcomes (Dijkstra-de Neijs et al., 2024). Studies emphasize that prolonged reliance on these strategies can intensify burnout and diminish overall quality of life.

Cultural context and adaptive patterns

Coping behaviors are strongly shaped by cultural and social factors. In collectivist societies like the Philippines, mothers often rely on faith, spirituality, and extended family networks as core coping resources. These culturally embedded strategies promote resilience by providing both emotional comfort and a sense of shared responsibility. Longitudinal research suggests that mothers' coping styles evolve as children age and as mothers gain experience navigating services and social expectations (Curley et al., 2025).

Statement of the problem

This study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of mothers raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with particular attention to the challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they utilize. Specifically, the study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by mothers raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?
2. What coping strategies do mothers of children with autism employ to navigate the challenges associated with ASD?

Methodology

This chapter presents the research design, sources of data, including the study locale, population, sampling, data-gathering instrument, and data analysis, as well as its ethical standards.

Research design

A descriptive phenomenological design was employed to explore and describe the lived experiences of mothers caring for children diagnosed with ASD. This design was chosen to capture the depth and essence of participants' emotional, behavioral, and social realities as they navigate daily caregiving responsibilities.

Participants and sampling

Mothers of children diagnosed with ASD were purposively selected from the province of Apayao, Philippines. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be the primary caregiver of a child formally diagnosed with ASD, and (b) have at least one year of caregiving experience. The sample size was deemed sufficient for phenomenological inquiry, ensuring thematic saturation while maintaining depth of understanding.

Data-gathering instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview protocol and an open-ended questionnaire designed to capture rich, narrative accounts of mothers' caregiving challenges and coping strategies. Questions were designed to elicit narratives about the mothers' challenges, coping strategies, emotional impact, daily caregiving adjustments, access to services, faith, and social supports. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment—either in person or online—to foster openness and trust.

Data-gathering procedure

Data were gathered over a 2–3-week period through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a semi-structured format, allowing flexibility for follow-up and probing questions to elicit deeper, more meaningful insights. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. After data collection, the recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of the participants' narratives. To further ensure the accuracy and credibility of the data, the transcripts were returned to the participants for verification and validation through member checking.

Data analysis tool

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. NVivo qualitative data-analysis software facilitated systematic coding, retrieval of coded segments, and theme organization. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where preliminary interpretations were shared with participants for verification, and inter-coder reliability, achieved by having a second independent researcher code a subset of transcripts and resolve discrepancies through discussion.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Divine Word College of Laoag—Graduate School of Education. Participants provided informed consent before data collection to ensure voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. All identifying information was anonymized to protect participant privacy.

Data presentation and analysis

Problem 1: What are the challenges faced by mothers raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?

The narratives of participating mothers were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Four major themes emerged that capture the multidimensional challenges of raising children with autism: (1) Behavioral and Communication Challenges, (2) Emotional and Psychological Impact, (3) Caregiving Burden and Daily Adjustments, and (4) Financial and Structural Barriers. The following table presents the themes, categories, and representative statements.

Table 1. Challenges faced by mothers raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

Themes	Categories	Statements
Behavioral & communication challenges	Managing meltdowns	“The biggest challenge is managing meltdowns and explaining his condition to others.” (Parent 1)
	Communication barriers	“Nico cannot talk, and sometimes it’s hard to understand him because of that... he can’t stay still, which sometimes bothers other people.” (Parent 6)
	Social adaptation	“Managing behavior, communication, and social skills is hard sometimes.” (Parent 7)
Emotional & psychological impact	Emotional exhaustion	“My mental health sometimes gets affected — I feel depressed... and I get tired.” (Parent 6)
	Growth and resilience	“I’ve grown stronger, more compassionate, and patient.” (Parent 3); “Over time, I’ve become more patient, hopeful, and emotionally stronger.” (Parent 8)
	Mixed emotions	“There are moments of joy and pride when I see him learning new things, but also times when I feel sadness, frustration, and guilt.” (Parent 8)
Caregiving burden & daily adjustments	Balancing roles	“Balancing his needs with work and family is challenging.” (Parent 3);
	Routine adjustments	“At home, I have to constantly adjust our routines and give extra time and attention to help him settle down.” (Parent 8);
	Fatigue	“I often get tired, but seeing his progress makes it worth it.” (Parent 5)
Financial & structural barriers	Therapy cost	“The cost of therapy is too high for us.” (Parent 6)
	Travel distance	“I need to bring him to Tuguegarao for therapy, which takes about three to four hours of travel. The long trips are tiring and costly, but I continue to do it because I know it’s important for his progress.” (Parent 8)

Source: Mercado (2026)

The data reveal that mothers face multifaceted challenges spanning behavioral, emotional, practical, and financial domains, creating a caregiving experience marked by both resilience and strain (Turnage & Conner, 2022). The dominant theme, Behavioral and Communication Challenges, highlights mothers' struggles to manage meltdowns, hyperactivity, and limited communication. These behaviors often result in social stigma and misunderstanding, prompting mothers to use nonverbal strategies, such as gestures, visual cues, and structured routines, to connect with their children (Al-Farsi et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2024).

The theme Emotional and Psychological Impact reflects the deep emotional toll of caregiving—manifested in fatigue, anxiety, and persistent worry about their child's future (Ilias et al., 2018). Yet, many mothers draw strength from faith, hope, and spirituality, which provide comfort and meaning amid uncertainty and serve as protective factors against emotional burnout (Karaca et al., 2021).

Caregiving Burden and Daily Adjustments describes the difficulty of balancing caregiving with household duties and employment. Mothers often sacrifice personal goals and social life, experiencing exhaustion and isolation due to role overload (Enea & Rusu, 2020). Despite this, they find purpose and fulfillment in their child's small developmental milestones, which help sustain motivation and emotional resilience (Altiere & von Kluge, 2020).

Lastly, Financial and Structural Barriers expose systemic inequities such as the high cost of therapies, lack of government assistance, and limited autism services in rural areas such as Apayao. These conditions force mothers to improvise home-based interventions, underscoring the need for policy reform and equitable access to autism support (Wallace-Watkin, 2023).

Overall, these themes portray a caregiving experience that is emotionally demanding yet sustained by love, faith, and resilience, reflecting the mothers' remarkable capacity to adapt and persevere amid adversity.

Problem 2: What coping strategies do mothers of children with autism employ to navigate the challenges associated with ASD?

This section presents the coping mechanisms employed by mothers in addressing the challenges of raising children with autism. The participants' accounts reveal the diverse strategies they use to maintain emotional stability, balance caregiving responsibilities, and sustain their overall well-being. Through thematic analysis, four interconnected coping themes emerged: faith-based coping and emotional resilience, social support and collective coping, adaptive coping and practical management, and self-care and personal growth.

Table 2. Coping strategies of mothers raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

Themes	Categories	Statements
Faith-based coping and emotional resilience	Prayer	<i>“Prayer is my greatest source of strength. Whenever I feel tired or overwhelmed, I talk to God and ask for guidance and peace of mind.”</i> (Parent 8)
	Hope	<i>“I make sure to celebrate even the smallest progress because it keeps me motivated and hopeful.”</i> (Parent 8)
	Emotional acceptance	<i>“I try to stay calm and patient when my child has behavioral episodes, reminding myself that he doesn’t mean to be difficult—it’s just how he expresses himself.”</i> (Parent 8)
Social support and collective coping	Family	<i>“My family’s support helps a lot, especially my husband, who takes over when I’m tired.”</i> (Parent 1)
	Community	<i>“Society should be more understanding and accepting of children with autism.”</i> (Parent 7)
	Peer networks	<i>“I cope by joining online parent groups and reading about autism.”</i> (Parent 1)
Adaptive coping and practical management	Routines	<i>“We follow a routine, watch educational movies to help him adapt, and I let Nico socialize.”</i> (Parent 6)
	Therapy	<i>“Occupational therapy, speech therapy, behavioral therapy, and SPED.”</i> (Parent 6)
	Organization	<i>“Balancing my responsibilities as a mother, a nurse, and a wife is not easy... but I try to stay organized and prioritize what’s truly important.”</i> (Parent 8)
Self-care and personal growth	Stress relief	<i>“When I have time, I listen to music or take short walks to relax.”</i> (Parent 8) •
	Continuous learning	<i>“I read articles and watch videos online about autism to better understand my child’s behavior.”</i> (Parent 8)

Source: Mercado (2026)

The findings reveal that mothers use a combination of emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, forming an adaptive response to the continuous stress of raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Curley et al., 2025; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This dual approach demonstrates their psychological flexibility and resilience despite daily caregiving demands.

Emotion-focused coping emerged as the most dominant strategy. Mothers relied on prayer, faith, and hope for comfort and strength, enabling them to find meaning in their struggles. Social support from family, friends, and fellow parents also provided emotional validation and reduced feelings of isolation (Cheung, R. Y., et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, problem-focused coping involved structured routines, time management, and participation in support or advocacy groups. These actions helped mothers manage behavioral challenges, balance responsibilities, and gain access to shared knowledge and community resources (Yaacob et al., 2022).

The integration of both strategies illustrates a balanced model of adaptive resilience. Emotion-focused coping offers emotional grounding, while problem-focused coping promotes practical problem-solving. Together, they enable mothers to face the complexities of autism caregiving with strength, purpose, and hope (Altiere & von Kluge, 2020; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Results and discussion

The findings reveal that mothers of learners with autism face multifaceted challenges encompassing behavioral, emotional, caregiving, and structural domains, yet exhibit resilience through faith, social support, and adaptive coping. These experiences underscore the interdependence between personal endurance and socio-cultural contexts that shape caregiving realities.

Behavioral and communication challenges were central to the mothers' experiences. Managing meltdowns, maintaining routines, and interpreting their child's behaviors posed persistent difficulties. Similar findings were reported by Al-Farsi et al. (2021) and Kuhlthau et al. (2020), who emphasized that behavioral regulation and limited communication remain primary stressors among parents of children with autism. Moreover, mothers in this study reported social misunderstanding and judgment, reinforcing the notion that caregiving stress extends beyond the home and is influenced by community awareness and stigma.

Emotional exhaustion and anxiety were also pervasive. Mothers expressed fear for their children's future, consistent with findings by Provenzi et al. (2019), who identified uncertainty and emotional distress as key psychological burdens for parents of children with autism. Yet, despite these strains, many mothers developed acceptance and inner resilience. This adaptive response aligns with contemporary coping frameworks emphasizing emotional regulation and meaning-making as pathways to resilience (Altiere & von Kluge, 2020).

Caregiving responsibilities imposed significant physical and temporal burdens. Mothers often struggled to balance household, employment, and caregiving duties, resulting in fatigue and social withdrawal. Research by Park and Song (2021) similarly found that mothers of children with autism frequently experience role overload and limited personal time. In the Philippine context, such pressures are intensified by cultural expectations of maternal caregiving, reflecting the gendered division of family labor.

Financial and structural barriers further compounded these challenges. Limited access to affordable therapies and the need to travel long distances—such as to Tuguegarao—placed additional economic strain on families. This mirrors findings by Jang et al. (2023), who reported that socioeconomic disparities significantly influence access to autism-related services, particularly in rural or resource-limited settings.

Despite these adversities, mothers demonstrated remarkable resilience through a range of coping mechanisms. Faith and spirituality emerged as vital sources of strength, helping mothers reinterpret caregiving challenges as purposeful and growth-oriented experiences. This finding is consistent with the current literature, which identifies spirituality as a protective factor against caregiver burnout (Chowdhury et al., 2022). Social support from spouses, family members, and community networks provided emotional relief and practical assistance, reinforcing the collectivist nature of Filipino family systems. Adaptive coping strategies—such as structured routines, time management, and participation in advocacy networks—enabled mothers to regain control and sustain daily functioning. Moreover, engaging in self-care and personal growth activities helped preserve psychological balance and prevent emotional exhaustion.

Overall, these findings highlight caregiving as both burdensome and transformative. The interaction between behavioral stressors and coping strategies forms a cyclical process of adaptation, resilience, and renewal. This multidimensional resilience framework—anchored in faith, social bonds, and adaptive management—illustrates how mothers navigate the enduring demands of raising a child with autism. Recognizing these interrelated dynamics is crucial for developing culturally responsive interventions that support both the caregivers and the children they nurture.

Conclusion

The study revealed that mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) encounter interconnected behavioral, emotional, caregiving, and structural challenges that profoundly impact their daily functioning and psychological well-being. The findings indicate that behavioral and communication difficulties are the most persistent stressors, intensified by emotional exhaustion, financial hardship, and limited access to support services. Despite these burdens, mothers demonstrated remarkable resilience through faith, social support, adaptive problem-solving, and self-care practices, reflecting their capacity to transform adversity into personal growth. Interpreted through Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the results suggest that maternal adaptation is shaped by the interaction between individual coping resources and broader social, cultural, and structural contexts. Therefore, the study recommends implementing holistic, multi-level interventions that integrate psychosocial support, faith-based initiatives, and accessible community programs to strengthen maternal resilience and enhance both caregiver well-being and the developmental outcomes of children with autism.

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