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## Perception of Social Support among Mothers of Autistic Children

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### Abstract

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The present study investigates the difference between mothers of autistic children and mothers of atypical children, perception of social support among the sample of 60 participants. Social Support Perception Scale and Personal data sheet were used to collect data. Comparison of mean scores was done using 't' test. Result revealed that significant difference between perception of social support of mothers of autistic children and mothers of atypical children

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Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder that typically occurs in the first three years of life. The signs develop gradually, but some children with autism will reach their developmental milestones at a normal pace and then regress. It causes impairment or disturbance in three main areas Social skills, communicative (verbal as well as non-verbal) skills and in their repetitive and restricted behaviours. Autistic individuals may show abnormal responses to sensations. Any one or more of the senses may be affected. All these difficulties manifest themselves in behaviour i.e. abnormal ways of relating to people, objects and events in the environment.

Parenting a child with a developmental disability such as autism is a complex situation of chronic stress for the parents (Shapiro & Accardo, 2008). Such long-term care not only impacts on parents' various life domains (e.g. marriage, career) and leads to caregiver stress, but also affects service utilization and treatment effectiveness for the children and their family as a whole, which amount to significant societal costs.

Social support refers to the individual's perception that he or she can be helped or can attain the understanding, cooperation and assistance of close or significant persons. This help can be instrumental (e.g., a parent's need for a ride) and/or social and emotional from a close person while coping with stress. Social and community support also emerges as a significant resource for families under stress and as a protective factor that contributes to successful adjustment of parents of children with developmental disorders (Altieri & Kluge, 2009; Armstrong et al. 2005; Bromley et al., 2004; Dunst et al., 1997; Tehee et al., 2009; White & Hastings et al., 2005).

According to Schopler and Mesibov (1984) formal social support is the assistance that is social, psychological, physical, or financial and is provided either for free or in exchange for a fee through an organized group or agency and informal support is a network that include the immediate and extended family, friends, neighbors, and other parents of children with disabilities. Herman and Thompson (1995) observe that parents reported that informal supports provide the most assistance, while formal support opportunities, such as social clubs, and day care centers were not.

According to Fischer, Corcoran, and Fischer (2007), social support has been found in a number of studies to be an important buffer against family crisis factors, and to be a factor in family resiliency promoting family recovery, and as a mediator of family distress. The research on the use of social support by families of children with autism spectrum disorder has focused on mothers, giving less attention to the impact such support may have on fathers, siblings, or

the family unit. This choice may reflect the mother's traditional role as primary caregiver, particularly when the child has a disability, or it may suggest that social support impacts mothers and fathers differently; however, the importance of social support in the overall wellbeing of the mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder is clear.

According to Gray and Holden (1992), mothers who perceived higher levels of informal and formal social support reported lower levels of depression, anxiety, and anger. The researchers like Herman and Thompson (1995) found out that lower level of social support served as the most powerful predictor of depression and anxiety in parents of children with autism. The inability to locate or access social support can affect a mother's overall wellbeing. Informal maternal support comes from the spouse or significant others provide some of the most beneficial support to mothers.

According to Boyd (2002); Hutton and Caron (2005) families face many difficulties from the high demands and challenges of autism spectrum disorder characteristics like their child's unique needs and they recommended several therapies treatments and educational training programmes.

Siklos and Kerns, (2006), views that parents and families take an active role to assess more social support in order to meet the needs raising by the children with other disabilities besides autism spectrum disorder.

Dunn et al. (2001) reported that social supports were effective coping mechanisms for dealing with the daily stress of rearing a child with autism.

Social support is defined as being multidimensional, comprised of both emotional (e.g., affection, sympathy and understanding, acceptance, and esteem from others) and instrumental (e.g., goods, services, and information) functions that aid in mediating stress and dealing with day-to-day interactions (Dunst, Trivette, & Cross, 1986; Flynn, 1990; Krahn, 1993; Meadan, Halle, & Ebata, 2010; Valentine, 1993).

Dunst, Trivette, and Hambry (2007) observed that when families receive the aid and assistance that match their identified needs and priorities then functioning of parents and child is enhanced. Both emotional and instrumental supports have been linked to reducing stress and improving the functioning and well-being of family members. Only families can identify the type of support that is important to them. Trivette, Dunst, and Hamby (2010) views that research underscores the importance of families' having choices and decision-making opportunities about issues concerning their child and family.

Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the social support among a sample of mothers of autistic children. Results of this study have the potential to identify specific personal characteristics and coping methods associated with psychological wellbeing among this population. Additionally, these data could enhance understanding of the types of strategies which might be incorporated into specialised interventions for these mothers.

### **Objectives**

1. To find out whether there is significant difference between mothers of autistic children and mothers of atypical children in perception of social support.
2. To find out whether there is significance difference in perception of social support between various groups categorised on the bases of socio demographic variables (mother's age, income, employment) of mothers of autistic children.

### **Hypotheses**

1. There will not be any significant difference between mothers of autistic children and mothers of atypical children in perception of social support.
2. There will not be significance difference in perception of social support between various groups categorised on the bases of socio demographic variables (mother's age, income, employment) of mothers of autistic children.

## Method

### Participants

The participants for the present study consisted of sixty mothers (30 mothers of autistic children and 30 mothers of atypical children) from Trivandrum district of the state of Kerala. Who were statistically matched on sociodemographic variables. The simple random sampling was used in this investigation. The subjects (thirty mothers of autistic children) were randomly selected from Trivandrum Institute of Cognitive and Behavioural Applications (TICOBA) in Trivandrum, Kerala and mothers of atypical children from same district.

### Instruments

1. Social Support Perception Scale: Social Support Perception Scale developed by Jose Thelakkatt and Sylaja (2005) was used for measuring the perception of social support of the adult. This instrument consists of 24 items with three subtests, namely family, friends and others. Correlation between the two sets of scores was obtained using Carl Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The correlation between the scores was 0.86, which was significant at 0.1 level. Correlation between the scores was found to be 0.84 indicating that the scale has moderate concurrent validity.
2. Personal Data Sheet: A personal data sheet was used to collect information on relevant socio-demographic characteristics of the participants like mother's age, income and employment status.

### Procedure

The required data was collected from Trivandrum Institute of Cognitive and Behavioural Applications (TICOBA) in Trivandrum, Kerala. After a brief introduction about the purpose of the study, Social Support Scale and Personal Data Sheet were administered to the participant. Researcher requested to read all the statements carefully and respondent them honesty. The respondents were assured of the maintenance of confidentiality of their responses. Mothers of atypical children were also collected from the same district after considering the equality in this socioeconomic status.

Inclusion Criteria for sample was at least one child diagnosed with autism, mothers with an age between 20-40 years and they are belonging to Kerala. Exclusion Criteria was presence of any other disorders and children less than 2 and more than 18 years.

### Results and Discussion

To test the hypothesis, there will not be any significant difference between mothers of autistic children and mothers of atypical children in perception of social support the collected data were analyzed using student t-test and the results are presented in table 1.

Table 1

*Mean, SD and 't' value of perception of social support by mothers of autistic children and mothers of atypical children*

Variable	Mothers of autistic children (N=30)		Mothers of atypical children (N=30)		't'
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Perception of Social Support	85.57	16.258	97.70	13.884	3.108*

\*p<.05

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation and the 't' value in perception of social support of mothers of autistic and atypical children. The mean and standard deviation of perception of social support of mothers of autistic children are 85.57 and 16.258 respectively and that of mothers of atypical children are 97.70 and 13.884 respectively. The calculated 't' value is 3.108 which is statistically significant at 0.05 level.

The result obtained in the table indicates that there is significance difference among mothers of autistic children and mothers of atypical children in perception of social support. It can see that mothers of atypical children perception of social support score are higher than the mothers of autistic children. This may be due to the false perception of mothers of autistic children that they would get lower social support or they expect more social support from their family, friends and society.

The other variable which plays an important role in social support is age of the person concerned. Here the investigator categorised the participants into two ie mother with age below 30 and above 30 years. The mean scores on perception of social support of both group were compared and the results are presented in table 2.

Table 2

*Mean, SD and 't' value of perception of social support by age of mothers of autistic children*

Variable	Age (Below 30)		Age (30 & above)		't'
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Perception of Social Support	82.67	15.905	87.50	16.653	0.80

Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation and the 't' value of perception of social support of age of mothers of autistic children. The mean and standard deviation perception of social support of age (below 30) of mothers of autistic children was 82.67 and 15.905 respectively and that of age (30 & above) of mothers of autistic children was 87.50 and 16.653 respectively. The calculated 't' value was 0.80 which is statistically not significant.

To know the whether the income of the mother parent have any relation with their perception of social support, the subjects were classified into two as person with an income blow 6 lack and above 6 lack. The mean score on perception of social support of these two groups were compared and results are presented in table 3.

Table 3

*Mean, SD and 't' value of perception of social support by income of mothers of autistic children*

Variable	Income (below 6 lacks)		Income (6 lacks & above)		't'
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Perception of Social Support	79.88	15.095	92.07	15.534	2.17*

\*p< .05

Table 3 shows the mean, standard deviation and the 't' value of perception of social support based on the income of mother's of autistic children. The mean and standard deviation of income (below 6 lacks) of mothers of autistic children are 79.88 and 15.095 respectively and that of income (6 lacks & above) of mothers of autistic children are 92.07 and 15.534 respectively. The calculated 't' value is 2.174 which is statistically significant at 0.05 level.

The results revealed that there is significance difference from low income families and higher income families of mothers of autistic children in perception of social support. It can be seen that mothers of higher income family perception of social support score are higher than the mothers of low income family. Because, they have maximum opportunities for support from external sources by obtaining permanent services from other NGO's and other institutions

Table 4

Mean, SD and 't' value of employment by mothers of autistic children

Variable	Employment (non working)		Employment (working)		't'
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Perception of Social Support	89.05	17.161	79.55	13.171	1.70

Table 4 shows the mean, standard deviation and the 't' value of perception of social support by employment of mothers of autistic children. The mean and standard deviation of non working mothers of autistic children were 89.05 and 17.161 respectively and that of working mothers of autistic children were 79.55 and 13.171 respectively. The calculated 't' value was 1.700 which is statistically not significant.

### Conclusion

The study revealed that the perception of social support of mothers of atypical children is higher than mothers of autistic children. The findings of the study and conclusions drawn helped the investigator to suggest some measures to increase social support among mothers of autistic children.

Mothers who received less social support were also angrier. Limited social support may produce such negative effects in mothers because it forces them to withdraw from community-based events, which are potentially stress-reducing. And for mothers, as opposed to fathers, the perceived usefulness and availability of the social support network may play a more vital role in alleviating stress than its actual size. In fact, mothers most often want, and first seek, support from their spouses.

Parenting a child with autism can produce great stress and a sense of imbalance in the family system. To increase self-esteem among mothers of autistic children should ensure the overall mental health and psychological well-being among mothers through participation in structural organizations like social clubs, churches, and parent supporting groups and through the participation in extracurricular activities including family and community works like, charity works and family functions.

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