



Challenges, Coping Mechanisms, and Stress among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in CALABARZON

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Abstract

The increasing recognition of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) highlights the caregiving burden experienced by parents. This study aimed to determine the challenges, coping mechanisms, and stress of parents of children with ASD in CALABARZON and examined the relationships among these variables. The study used a descriptive–correlational design with 163 respondents. Data were gathered using a validated questionnaire and analyzed through weighted mean and Pearson *r*. Results show very high caregiving challenges, high coping mechanisms, and high stress levels among parents. Findings also reveal a very weak but significant relationship between challenges and coping mechanisms, while no significant relationships were found with stress. The conclusion is that despite coping strategies, parents continue to experience high stress, highlighting the need for strengthened support systems and the proposed P.A.R.E.N.T.S. Resilience Framework.

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication and restricted, repetitive behaviors, with varying severity due to genetic, neurological, and environmental factors. Early diagnosis is essential for improving developmental outcomes, but it is often delayed due to symptom overlap, limited specialist access, and resource constraints, particularly in developing settings (Singhi *et al.*, 2023)^[6].

ASD also significantly affects families, especially parents who assume intensive caregiving roles. They commonly experience high stress due to behavioral challenges, communication difficulties, sensory sensitivities, and unpredictable routines. These are further intensified by stigma, high therapy costs, limited-service availability, and inadequate professional support, resulting in emotional exhaustion and social isolation (Tong *et al.*, 2024)^[7]. In the Philippine context, parents—particularly those from low-income families—face substantial emotional and financial burdens that affect daily family functioning (Roxas *et al.*, 2022)^[4].

Despite these challenges, parents actively use coping mechanisms such as problem-focused strategies, mindfulness, acceptance, faith-based practices, and social support systems. These coping approaches help build resilience and reduce stress levels (Shepherd *et al.*, 2025)^[5]. Filipino caregivers often rely on faith, family solidarity, and community support as culturally grounded coping mechanisms (Contreras, 2025)^[2]. However, studies in the Philippines, especially in CALABARZON, remain limited in examining how these challenges, coping mechanisms, and stress levels interact (Leosala, 2023)^[3].

There is also a gap in understanding the experiences of fathers, low-income families, and the influence of local support systems on parental well-being, despite increasing ASD prevalence in the country (Andrada & Jusay, 2025)^[1]. To address these gaps, this study examines the challenges, coping mechanisms, and stress levels of parents of children with ASD in CALABARZON. The findings aim to support the development of culturally responsive and family-centered interventions that strengthen support systems and improve caregiver well-being in the region.

Methodology

- **Research Design:** This study employed a descriptive correlational design to determine the relationships of the challenges, coping mechanisms, and stress among parents of children with ASD in CALABARZON.
- **Participants:** 163 parents and primary caregivers of children diagnosed with ASD, residing in the provinces of Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon (CALABARZON).
- **Instrument:** A researcher-made questionnaire was used and validated by field experts. It included scales of challenges (8 domains), coping mechanisms (5 domains), and parental stress.
- **Data Collection and Ethics:** Respondents were provided informed consent before completing the survey via Google Forms. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed.
- **Data Analysis:** Weighted means were used to assess the challenges experienced, coping mechanisms employed, and parental stress. Pearson's *r* was applied to test the relationships between variables.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Mean Distribution of Challenges Experienced by the Parents of Children with ASD in CALABARZON

Challenges	Mean	Interpretation
Behavior	3.74	Very High
Communication	3.69	Very High
Social Interaction	3.71	Very High
Financial	3.83	Very High
Healthcare Access	3.94	Very High
Educational Support	3.75	Very High
Stigma	3.74	Very High
Emotional Strain	3.83	Very High

The table highlights the very high level of caregiving challenges experienced by parents in CALABARZON, particularly in healthcare access, financial concerns, and emotional strain. These results emphasize that systemic barriers such as limited specialist services and high therapy costs are the most significant burdens, more than child-specific difficulties. While behavioral, communication, educational, and social challenges were also rated very high, they are slightly less dominant compared to structural constraints. The high mean scores suggest that caregiving stress is deeply rooted in broader systemic and economic conditions affecting families of children with ASD.

Table 2: Coping Mechanisms Employed by the Parents of Children with ASD in CALABARZON

Coping Mechanisms	Mean	Interpretation
Self-care practices	3.74	High
Mindfulness Techniques	3.69	High
Behavior Management	3.71	High
Social Support System	3.83	High
Professional Counseling	3.94	High

The table highlights the high level of coping mechanisms among parents in CALABARZON, particularly self-care practices and mindfulness techniques, which rank highest among all domains. These results indicate that parents primarily rely on self-directed and emotion-focused strategies to manage caregiving stress. While behavior

management skills, social support systems, and professional counseling were also rated high, they are used less frequently compared to internal coping strategies. The high mean scores suggest that parents actively depend on personal emotional regulation and self-initiated practices to maintain well-being despite ongoing caregiving demands.

Table 3: Stress Levels among Parents of Children with ASD in CALABARZON

Parental Stress	4.00	High
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The table highlights the high level of overall stress experienced by parents in CALABARZON, with a weighted mean of 4.00. These results indicate that parental stress is not driven by a single factor but is a cumulative experience shaped by daily caregiving demands and long-term psychological burdens. The highest contributing indicators are future-oriented concerns about the child's long-term support and the emotional strain of managing behavioral challenges and navigating fragmented systems. The high means suggests that stress among parents reflects a continuous state of caregiving pressure and uncertainty rather than isolated stressful events.

Table 4: Correlation Between Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

Variables	r	Significance
Challenges and Coping Mechanisms	-.186	Significant (p < .018)

Results revealed a very weak negative correlation between challenges and coping mechanisms ($r = -.186$, $p = .018$). While the relationship is statistically significant, its minimal strength suggests that as the level of challenges increases, the frequency or effectiveness of coping slightly decreases. This implies that coping behaviors are not solely reactive to the intensity of challenges but are influenced by personal resilience and available resources.

Table 5: Correlation Between Challenges and Stress

Variables	r	Significance
Challenges and Stress	-.141	Not Significant (p < .072)

Results revealed a very weak negative correlation between challenges and parental stress ($r = -.141$, $p = .072$), which is not statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis was accepted. Despite parents reporting very high levels of challenges across multiple domains, these difficulties did not show a direct statistical association with stress levels, suggesting that stress is not solely determined by the intensity of caregiving demands.

Table 6: Correlation Between Coping Mechanisms and Stress

Variables	r	Significance
Coping Mechanisms and Stress	-.152	Not Significant (p < .053)

Results revealed a very weak positive correlation between coping mechanisms and parental stress ($r = .152$, $p = .053$), which is not statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis was accepted. This finding suggests that increased use of coping mechanisms does not necessarily lead to immediate stress reduction. Instead, these behaviors may be activated as a response to existing stress rather than acting as a direct preventative measure.

Conclusion

The findings of the study conclude that parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in CALABARZON experience high levels of caregiving challenges and stress while actively relying on different coping mechanisms to manage their responsibilities. Parents face extensive difficulties across behavioral, emotional, financial, healthcare, educational, and social domains, all of which contribute significantly to caregiving burden and affect their overall well-being. To cope with these demands, parents commonly depend on self-care practices, mindfulness techniques, behavior management skills, and social support systems, while professional counseling remains the least utilized due to accessibility and financial barriers.

The study further reveals that parents experience high levels of stress caused by uncertainty regarding their child's future, emotional exhaustion, financial strain, and difficulties navigating healthcare and educational systems. Increased caregiving challenges are associated with slight declines in coping effectiveness, suggesting that prolonged caregiving demands may gradually weaken parents' coping resources over time. However, the challenges encountered do not show a direct significant relationship with stress levels, indicating that many parents may develop resilience and adaptive responses despite ongoing difficulties. Similarly, coping mechanisms alone do not significantly reduce stress, highlighting the complex and multidimensional nature of stress regulation among parents of children with ASD.

Based on these findings, the proposed P.A.R.E.N.T.S. Resilience Framework provides a structured and family-centered approach to strengthen coping effectiveness, resilience, and psychological well-being through sustainable support systems and targeted interventions for parents of children with ASD in CALABARZON.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen support systems for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in CALABARZON. Healthcare providers, including pediatricians, developmental specialists, barangay health centers, schools, and SPED centers, should establish coordinated referral and support systems to improve access to ASD-related diagnostic and intervention services and lessen parental burden. Local Government Units (LGUs), in partnership with schools and universities, are encouraged to provide parent-focused stress management and coping workshops that promote adaptive and culturally responsive strategies.

Community-based parent support groups should also be strengthened through the collaboration of organizations such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), LGUs, non-government organizations, and faith-based institutions to reduce social isolation and encourage peer support among parents. In addition, greater access to affordable and culturally responsive counseling services should be made available to families. Families themselves should also be educated on the importance of shared caregiving responsibilities to improve emotional and practical support within the household.

Furthermore, policymakers are encouraged to allocate more resources toward healthcare, educational assistance, and financial support programs for families of children with ASD. The proposed P.A.R.E.N.T.S. Resilience Framework should

be implemented and regularly evaluated to ensure its long-term effectiveness in improving parental well-being. Lastly, future researchers are encouraged to explore longitudinal coping patterns and examine the role of social support in moderating parental stress among caregivers of children with ASD.

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