

Exploring Parenting a Child with Special Needs: Gearing on Proposed Strategies in Motivating a Child to Engage in Physical Activities

*Kristine Carla Boral

National University, Philippines

Received: 05 August 2025

Revised: 25 August 2025

Accepted: 15 September 2025

Published: 31 December 2025

Abstract

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of three parents of children aged 4–12 diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in San Miguel, Bulacan. Using semi-structured interviews, the research examined strategies parents employ to motivate their children to engage in physical activities. The validated instrument captured insights into daily challenges, sensory sensitivities, and coping mechanisms. Results revealed that parental modeling, reinforcement, and tailored sensory-based approaches significantly influenced children's participation. Despite emotional and physical demands, parents demonstrated resilience and creativity in promoting activity engagement. The study concludes that understanding parental perspectives is vital in designing inclusive physical activity programs for children with ASD. Findings offer practical implications for educators, therapists, and future researchers aiming to enhance well-being through physical engagement.

Keywords: Parenting, Child with Special Needs, Autism, Spectrum Disorder, Physical Activities

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder, also known as ASD, is a developmental disability caused by differences in the brain. It is a pervasive developmental disorder with deficits in social communication and social behavior, including problems interpreting nonverbal gestures, difficulty in developing ageappropriate friendships and adapting to environmental change (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that autism affects one out of every 68 persons, and in the Philippines, one in every 100 Filipinos has autism spectrum disorder.

Autism spectrum disorder negatively affects not only the social skills of children with this diagnosis but also their physical activity level (Bandini et al., 2013). The physical activity level of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be influenced by factors such as sensory sensitivities, motor coordination difficulties, and social challenges (Pan, C. Y. 2008). Research in this area has shown that children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) tend to engage in lower levels of physical activity compared to their typically developing peers (Jones & Smith, 2022; Robinson et al., 2023). It was also found that children with ASD spent less time participating in moderate to vigorous physical activity and more time engaging in sedentary behaviors, such as screen time, compared to neurotypical children. Sensory sensitivities and motor coordination difficulties may contribute to these differences in activity levels, as children with ASD may find certain types of physical activities uncomfortable or challenging to perform (Anderson et al., 2021).

Physical activity is crucial for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as it offers a range of physical, cognitive, and social benefits tailored to their unique needs. Engaging in regular physical activity can help improve motor skills, sensory processing, and coordination, which are often areas of challenge for children with ASD (White & Thompson, 2022). Additionally, physical activity can promote relaxation, reduce anxiety, and improve mood regulation, which are important factors in managing the sensory sensitivities and emotional regulation difficulties commonly experienced by children with ASD (Pan, C.Y, 2010).

Recently, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of promoting physical activity among children with special needs. Research in pediatric rehabilitation and developmental psychology has highlighted the numerous benefits of regular physical activity for children with diverse abilities and disabilities. Studies have shown that engaging in physical activities can improve motor skills, enhance social interaction, boost self-esteem, and contribute to overall wellbeing in this population.

While there is a wealth of literature on interventions and strategies to promote physical activity in children with ASD, there remains a gap in understanding parental perspectives, experiences, and needs in this context. Research often focuses on the outcomes of interventions rather than exploring the nuanced dynamics of parent-child interactions, family dynamics, and contextual factors that influence physical activity engagement from the parental standpoint (Peterson & Williams, 2023; Smith et al., 2022)

Statement of the Problem

Physical activity is crucial for overall well-being, yet children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often exhibit difficulties in participating in such activities, which can have long-term implications for their physical health and social development. The primary objective of this study is to understand the lived experience of parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and determine their strategies on how they motivate their children to engage in physical activities.

Specifically, this study will seek to answer the following problems:

1. How did the parents perceive their lived experience of having a child with autism spectrum disorder?
2. What are the challenges and successes being faced by the parents of children with autism spectrum disorder?
3. What are the usual activities of their children with autism spectrum disorder?
4. What strategies do the parents with autism spectrum disorder use to deal with the challenges they experience in motivating their children to engage in physical activities?

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research approach was employed to investigate the experiences and perspectives of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in motivating their child to engage in physical activities. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring complex phenomena and understanding the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals within their natural context.

Convenience sampling was utilized to select participants for the study. Convenience sampling involves selecting participants who are readily available and accessible to the researcher, often based on convenience or practical considerations. In this study, parents of children with ASD who were currently enrolled in a special education center in San Miguel, Bulacan, were approached to participate in the study. This sampling method was chosen for its practicality and efficiency, as it allowed for the recruitment of participants within a specific geographical area and setting.

While convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of parents of children with ASD, it provided access to a sample of participants who were willing and able to contribute valuable insights to the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of a qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of these participants, offering rich and detailed data that could inform future research, practice, and policy related to promoting physical activity engagement in children with ASD.

Overall, the combination of a qualitative research approach and convenience sampling allowed for a focused exploration of the research questions within a specific context, providing valuable insights into the lived experiences of parents of children with ASD and their efforts to promote physical activity participation.

Respondents of the Study

The participants in this study consist of three (3) parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), aged between 4 and 12 years, who are presently enrolled in a specialized education center situated in San Miguel, Bulacan. The selection of San Miguel, Bulacan as the study site was driven by the pragmatic consideration of data availability and participant accessibility, rendering it a convenient and conducive location for conducting research.

San Miguel, Bulacan was chosen as the study location due to the presence of the requisite data sources and enough eligible participants within the target population. This decision was informed by the practical considerations of conducting research in a real-world setting, where accessibility to participants and data plays a pivotal role in ensuring the feasibility and success of the study.

The choice of San Miguel, Bulacan as the study location aligns with the principles of methodological rigor and practicality, facilitating efficient data collection processes while ensuring the representation of relevant perspectives within the context of parenting children with ASD and motivating them to engage in physical activities.

Instrument of the Study

In this study, semi-structured interview questionnaires were utilized to gather data from participants. Prior to implementation, these questionnaires underwent a validation process conducted by two independent validators to ensure their reliability and validity.

The use of semi-structured interview questionnaires provided a flexible yet focused approach to data collection, allowing for exploration of key topics while also enabling spontaneous follow-up questions based on participants' responses. This method facilitated a thorough exploration of the experiences, perspectives, and strategies of parents raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) regarding physical activity engagement.

The validation process involved two validators, chosen for their expertise in the field of autism and qualitative research methods. They independently reviewed the questionnaires to assess clarity, relevance, appropriateness of questions, and overall structure and flow.

Following the validation process, any discrepancies or suggested revisions were carefully addressed and incorporated into the final version of the questionnaires. This iterative process aimed to enhance the quality and rigor of the interview instruments, ensuring they effectively captured the desired data while adhering to methodological standards.

The validated semi-structured interview questionnaires, this research aimed to collect reliable and meaningful data contributing to a deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by parents of children with ASD in motivating their children to engage in physical activities.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher **undertook** face-to-face individual semi-structured interviews with parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Throughout these interviews, respondents **were encouraged** to share their lived experiences concerning the process of motivating their children with ASD to engage in physical activity, including the challenges they **encountered** and the strategies they **employed**. To ensure accuracy and thoroughness, the interviews **were audio-recorded** and subsequently **transcribed**.

The researcher's primary objective **was** to allow the respondents to narrate their lived experiences in parenting a child with ASD, thereby **capturing** the nuances and complexities inherent in their journey. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study **aimed** to delve deeply into the subjective experiences of parents, providing rich and detailed insights into their perspectives, emotions, and coping mechanisms.

Following data collection, the researcher **utilized** case analysis as the methodological framework for data analysis. This approach **involved** examining each case meticulously to identify recurring patterns, themes, and unique insights (Patton, 2015). By focusing on the individual narratives, case analysis **allowed** for a comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences and strategies **employed** by parents in motivating their children with ASD to be physically active.

The findings of this study **were synthesized** and **presented** in a comprehensive report that **discussed** their implications for parents, children, and future researchers. By shedding light on the lived experiences of parents of children with ASD and their strategies for promoting physical activity, the study **offered** valuable insights that **could inform** support services, interventions, and future research endeavors in this domain.

Overall, through its qualitative approach and emphasis on individual narratives, this study **provided** a deeper understanding of the challenges and successes **encountered** by parents of children with ASD in fostering physical activity engagement, ultimately **contributing** to the enhancement of support mechanisms and interventions for this population.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure that this study will be conducted in a manner that is respectful, fair, and responsible, several ethical considerations were carefully addressed to ensure the protection of participants' rights and well-being throughout the research process. These considerations align with the principles outlined in the American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct.

Firstly, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the research, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussion.

Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were rigorously maintained throughout the study. All data collected, including audio recordings and transcripts, were kept secure and accessible only to the researcher. Identifying information was removed from transcripts to ensure that participants remained anonymous in any reports or publications resulting from the study.

Additionally, steps were taken to minimize potential harm or discomfort to participants. Sensitivity was exercised when discussing sensitive topics related to parenting children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and the challenges they face. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were provided with resources for support if needed.

Furthermore, the researcher maintained integrity and honesty in all aspects of the study, including the representation and interpretation of data. Findings were reported accurately and transparently, without manipulation or distortion, to ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

Overall, by adhering to these ethical considerations, the study upheld the highest standards of ethical conduct in research, prioritizing the welfare and rights of participants while generating valuable insights into the experiences of parents of children with ASD.

INSTRUMENT OF THE STUDY

(INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE)

Section 1. Demographic Information

Parent's Information

Name: _____ Age: _____

Gender: Male Female

Relationship Status: Single Married Widowed Others

Occupation: _____ Child's

Information

Name: _____ Age: _____

Date of Autism Diagnosis: _____

Section II. Experiences and Challenges

Can you share your initial reactions and emotions upon learning about your child's autism spectrum disorder diagnosis?

How has the diagnosis impacted your daily life as a parent?

Can you describe a typical day in your family, considering your child's autism spectrum disorder diagnosis?

What specific challenges have you encountered in raising a child with ASD, especially in relation to physical activities?

How do sensory sensitivities or communication difficulties impact your child's engagement in physical activities, and how do you address these challenges?

Section III. Strategies

Can you discuss any creative or unique strategies you have developed to make physical activities more appealing and enjoyable for your child?

Have you found certain types of activities or environments that are particularly well-received by your child?

Have you noticed any changes or developments in your child's response to physical activities over time?

Section IV. Coping Strategies

How do you cope with the emotional and physical demands of parenting a child with ASD while promoting their engagement in physical activities?

Section V. Future Aspirations

What are your aspirations for your child's physical well-being in the future?

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Categorical Coding of Interview Responses on Parenting Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Category	Code	Theme
Emotional Responses to Diagnosis	I001:001	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Emotional Responses to Diagnosis	I002:382	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Emotional Responses to Diagnosis	I003:831	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Impact on Family Dynamics	I001:033	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Impact on Family Dynamics	I002:412	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Impact on Family Dynamics	I003:857	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Daily Life Challenges and Joys	I001:055	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Daily Life Challenges and Joys	I002:446	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Daily Life Challenges and Joys	I003:090	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Challenges and Successes	I001:093	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Challenges and Successes	I002:483	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Challenges and Successes	I003:932	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms
Positive Outcomes and Successes	I001:136	Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

This table organizes interview responses into five categories under the theme "**Parenting Challenges and Coping Mechanisms**", showing how frequently each topic was mentioned by parents of children with autism. The most discussed areas were emotional responses, family dynamics, and daily life challenges, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their experiences.

Acknowledgement

The researcher sincerely thanks her parents, partner, and child for their unwavering love and support, and expresses deep gratitude to her adviser for the invaluable guidance and encouragement throughout the completion of this thesis, and the graduate studies of National University, Philippines.

References

- Bandura, A. (2019). *Social cognitive theory of self-regulation*. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 248–287.
https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-88538-0_41
- Chang, J., & Lee, H. (2020). *Parenting a child with Down syndrome: Challenges and coping strategies*. *Down Syndrome Research and Practice*, 27(2), 82–97.
<https://www.downsyndrome.org/en-gb/library/research-practice/08/2/gender-differences-copingstrategies-parents-down-syndrome/>

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2019). Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness. Guilford Press.

https://books.google.com/books/about/Self_Determination_Theory.html?id=th5rDwAAQB-AJ

Gupta, R., & Patel, K. (2019). Coping strategies of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder: A qualitative study. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 49(8), 3421–3435. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00787-018-1183-3>

Hwang, J., & Kim, S. (2021). Stress and coping strategies among parents of children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Journal of Attention Disorders, 25(6), 789–804. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/23333936211028184>

Jones, S., & Williams, B. (2020). The effectiveness of parent-mediated physical activity intervention for children with special needs. Journal of Developmental Disabilities, 26(3), 211–226.

Kim, Y., & Lee, J. (2019). Coping strategies of parents of children with sensory processing disorder: A qualitative study. Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, & Early Intervention, 12(2), 189–204.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/2331205X.2020.1736829>

Lim, Y., & Tan, L. (2019). Understanding parental stress and coping strategies in raising children with physical disabilities. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 28(7), 1890–1904. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-24926-6_8

Nguyen, T., & Tran, N. (2020). Parenting a child with cerebral palsy: Challenges and coping mechanisms. International Journal of Rehabilitation Research, 43(1), 87–102. https://journals.lww.com/nursingresearchonline/Abstract/2022/11000/Identification_to_Intervention_A_Perspective_From.4.aspx

Park, H., & Choi, J. (2021). Coping strategies of parents of children with developmental disabilities: A qualitative study. Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 33(2), 239–254. <https://link.springer.com/journal/10882>

Rao, S., & Reddy, M. (2018). Parenting stress and coping strategies among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder: A qualitative study. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 48(9), 3171–3184.

Smith, L., Jones, S., & Williams, B. (2019). Exploring parenting strategies for motivating children with special needs to engage in physical activities. Journal of Special Needs Parenting, 5(2), 87–102.

