

Coping Strategies for Parents with Autistic Children: A Review from Islamic Psychology

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify the sources of stress and coping strategies employed by parents and to provide a review from the perspective of Islamic psychology. The research was conducted using a phenomenological approach in Binjai, North Sumatra. The informants comprised five main participant, namely parents of autistic children who met the predetermined criteria, and three supporting informants. Information was gathered using in-depth interviews. The main findings indicated that the sources of parental stress are caused by the parents' lack of knowledge about autism, the difficulty of acceptance from the social environment and extended family, especially for single male autistic children from the Batak/Karo ethnic group who are expected to be the heirs of the clan, the high costs of care and education for autistic children, and uncertainty about the future. Parents who employ all four stress coping strategies show better stress control, which helps their autistic children achieve better development. From the perspective of Islamic psychology, these four strategies are fundamental attitudes of a Muslim in facing problems. This study also found that social and economic support have a greater influence than parental education on stress management. There is currently no community for parents of autistic children in Binjai, and autistic children have talents that can hold economic value. Therefore, it is necessary to form a parent community and an economic empowerment program based on the talents of autistic children.

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INTRODUCTION

Every couple always hopes for a child who will bring happiness (Sa'adah & Pratisti, 2019). However, many couples desire to have children and eventually do, but the children are not in the condition they hoped for, such as having special needs or disabilities (Aulia, 2020; Hafizah & Mulyani, 2022; Satter, 2010). Children with special needs whose development is affected by socialization and communication disorders are commonly known as autistic (Abdullah, 2013; Kristiana & Widayanti, 2021). Children with autism spectrum disorder have rigid and repetitive interests and behaviors (Pietikainen, 2020; Gobrial, 2018).

Autism is currently a major concern due to the high prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at the global level. The WHO presents very shocking data that 1 in 160 people worldwide experience autism spectrum disorder, which is equivalent to more than 7.6 million cases of autism among newborns each year, and most of them have disabilities. This figure accounts for approximately 0.3% of the global disease burden (World Health Organization, 2022). In Indonesia, there are no exact figures on autism, but the number of autistic patients is estimated to increase by 500 people each year. In 2020-2021, there were 5,530 cases of developmental issues related to autism (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2022).

The presence of an autistic child affects various aspects of family life (Mohammadi et al., 2020). Various studies show that parents with autistic children experience difficulties and anxiety in parenting. These difficulties arise from the low communication skills possessed by autistic children, making them unable to express their desires, exhibiting antisocial behavior that makes them appear different from their environment, and their inability to adapt, leading to tantrums and hyperactivity (Gobrial, 2018; Mirnawati, 2019; Pastor-Cerezuela et al., 2015).

Parents find it difficult to accept and face the fact that the child they gave birth to has autism. Parents of autistic children experience pressure both physically, psychologically, and socially (Ariesta, 2016; Da Paz et al., 2018; Tagavi, 2021). They experience confusion in parenting because they do not understand autism itself and even have misconceptions about the disorder (Crane et al., 2016; Maharani, 2019). Parents of autistic children often blame themselves due to a belief that this is a result of past sins committed by the family (Daroni et al., 2018; Wu, 2019). The lack of knowledge about autism in society causes parents of autistic children to experience pressure and withdraw from their social environment (Amelasasih, 2018; Yaacob et al., 2021). Society stigmatizes autistic children as a source of problems, and parents of autistic children are often considered to have failed in controlling their children's tantrums in public, leading to the perception that these parents are incompetent in child-rearing (Boyle, 2018; Ng & Ng, 2022).

In some tribes in Indonesia that consider children to be the pride of the family, heirs of the clan, and descendants (such as the Batak, Karo, Mandailing, and Nias

tribes in North Sumatra), parents who have an autistic son take a long time to accept the presence of their child. The stigma that autistic children are considered unable to provide hope as heirs of the clan and happiness for parents, family, and relatives (*hagabeon*) prompts parents to withdraw from the family (Daulay, 2018; Sirait et al., 2023). These stigmas from the social environment affect the parenting of parents with autistic children in their child-rearing practices because the stigmas built today influence a person's life experiences and actions in the future (Boyle, 2018).

Parents who have autistic children experience higher levels of stress compared to parents who have children with other special needs (Etournaud, 2017; Padden & James, 2017; Rivard et al., 2014; Tobing, 2005). Stress is an individual's response to situations and events that threaten the individual and weaken their ability to cope with various stressors (Leger et al., 2016). Stress can produce negative reactions and emotions such as anger, rage, fear, anxiety, and sadness at varying levels (Biggs et al., 2017). Factors contributing to the stress of parents with autistic children include the very heavy caregiving burden (McStay et al., 2013). The hyperactive and unpredictable behavior of autistic children (Desiningrum, 2020) causes various long-term uncertainties about the child's survival, health, and future development (Putri et al., 2019).

An autistic child can cause conflict for couples. Alós et al. (2022) stated that parents use avoidance strategies by leaving their families because they cannot withstand the stress they feel. Each married couple, as parents of an autistic child, has different levels of stress (Raharja et al., 2020). The stress level of a mother with an autistic child is more related to her caregiving, nurturing, and educational responsibilities (Hardi & Sari, 2019). On the other hand, a father's stress level is more related to financial aspects (Puspanuari, 2011). As a breadwinner, a father fears his inability to meet his child's basic needs and the lack of time to gather information about his child because most of his time is spent working (Seymour et al., 2022).

Violence against autistic children is prone to occur, often perpetrated by parents and their close social environment (Gibbs & Pellicano, 2023; Mohammadi et al., 2019). Therefore, it is very important to manage the stress of parents who have autistic children; unmanaged parental stress can lead to parents committing violence against their children. The way to cope with stress is called coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping is the individual's ability to adjust, adapt, and face challenges from stress sources (Matthews & Campbell, 1998; Campbell, 2004). In this case, coping has the function of reducing stress tension and facilitating recovery to balance stressors. There are differences in how each individual responds to stressful situations, which is related to the basic understanding of stress coping or how someone deals with problems or negative emotions caused by stress (Maryam, 2017).

According to Hagemann (1992), there are two types of coping: problem-focused coping, which is directed at managing the problem that is the stressor, and

emotion-focused coping, which is directed at regulating emotional responses to the problem. Similar to [Hagemann \(1992\)](#), several studies conclude that, in general, coping is divided into four main categories: 1) Problem-focused coping, which addresses the problem presented by the stressor: Examples of this style include active handling, planning, restrained handling, and emphasizing competing activities. 2) Emotion-focused coping, which aims to reduce negative emotions associated with the problem. Examples include seeking something positive, acceptance, turning to religion, and humor. 3) Meaning-focused coping, where an individual uses cognitive strategies to obtain and manage the meaning of a situation. 4) Social coping, which occurs when an individual reduces stress by seeking emotional or instrumental support from their community ([Algorani & Gupta, 2024](#); [Biggs et al., 2017](#); [Folkman, 2020](#)).

Parents of autistic children use four strategies. [Wardani \(2009\)](#) stated that the coping strategies of parents with autistic children are oriented towards problem-solving (problem-based coping), while instrumental coping behaviors emerge, which include problem-based coping, self-control, denial, and meaning-making involved in emotion-focused care. The positive effects of parent coping behavior include caution and meaning-making, while the negative effects are addressed through introversion, negotiation skills, and taking responsibility. [Santana and Istiana \(2019\)](#) showed that parents use emotion-focused strategies, utilizing religiosity to develop a more resilient personality (hardiness). [Ma'rifah et al. \(2018\)](#) showed that parents of autistic children use meaning-focused strategies, such as seeking information to educate themselves and giving special attention to autistic children in their development and progress because they have the same rights as other children. [Chukwu et al. \(2019\)](#) state that parents of children with disabilities employ social coping strategies (seeking support), as they need social support and professional assistance from social workers to enable family members to adopt more positive coping strategies.

The importance of research on the causes of stress and coping strategies used by parents of autistic children is significant. It encourages the author to empirically examine the coping strategies of parents in raising and addressing challenge related to autistic children. This research aims to provide a foundational understanding of the autism experience from the parents' perspective, ensuring that the stress faced by parents of autistic children does not interfere with their ability to fulfill their roles as parents. The study investigates the sources of stress for parents of autistic children, the coping strategies employed by these parents, and how these coping strategies are viewed from the perspective of Islamic psychology.

METHODS

Research Design

This research was conducted in the city of Binjai using a phenomenological approach, a qualitative research technique applied to reveal the commonalities

between the meanings that constitute the essence of a concept or phenomenon experienced by conscious individuals within a group in their lives (Creswell et al., 2015). The phenomenological method used in this research adopts the Descriptive Phenomenological Psychology (DPP) method (La Kahija, 2017; Langdridge, 2007), which aims to understand the situations experienced by the community in their daily lives (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The method's emphasis highlights four core processes from Moustakas (1994): epoche, phenomenal reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meaning and essence.

This research focuses on the experiences of parents with autism. It is centered on the triggers of parental stress as well as the management of stress during the upbringing of autistic children. In the epoché process, researchers must detach themselves from their experiences and knowledge. The main focus of this research is the experiences of parents with autistic children regarding their stress triggers and stress management.

In phenomenological reduction, the researcher describes the meaning of the experiences of the research subjects in a structured language. In this case, the researcher conducts bracketing by focusing on the topic and in-depth questions regarding the triggers of parental stress and stress management.

The researcher also performs horizontalizing by sorting statements from the subjects into important and meaningful statements. From the process of imaginative variation, the researcher seeks meaning by structurally describing the experiences presented by the research subjects. From the process of synthesis of meaning and essence, the researcher intuitively integrates textual and structural descriptions into statements as the essence of the experience of the phenomenon.

Data Source

This research used a purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 2015). This research consists of: 1) Main informants. There are five main informants, namely, five parents of autistic children. The main criteria for the primary informants are that they are biological parents of autistic children who are willing to participate by completing 2) Supporting informants. Three people serve as supporting informants. They are the closest to the main informants, namely family members, teachers, or relatives who know the main informants' daily lives in caring for autistic children. Details of the research informants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informants

No	Informant Initials	Level of Education	Status
Main informants			
1.	Mr S	Undergraduate Degree	Father of MS
2.	Mrs Y	Undergraduate Degree	Mother of Y
3.	Mrs N	Senior High School	Mother of N
4.	Mrs. I	Graduate Degree	Mother of I
5.	Mrs D	Junior High School	Mother of D

No	Informant Initials	Level of Education	Status
Support informants			
1.	NS	Graduate Degree	Teacher
2.	TS	Senior High School	Nanny from I
3.	SB	Senior High School	Brother of D

Data Collection Method

Data collection was conducted using deep interviews. The selection of these five parents considered the economic level, the parents' education level, and the therapy facilities. It is to This approach adds valuable information to the research. The tool used for the interview guidelines is open and semi-structured, allowing for obtaining the acquisition of in-depth information, also known as an open-ended interview. Open-ended questions enable researchers to determine the direction of the answers and provide the opportunity to respond to questions from various dimensions.

Data Analysis

This study used data analysis employing the phenomenological data analysis method. Data analysis can be defined as the process of research and sequential compilation following the classification of data obtained through extensive interview methods, notes and conclusions from field observations, documentation as a complementary depiction of valid data, and other supplementary notes. The analysis phase includes the following steps: data breakdown, data presentation, and conclusion.

To ensure data quality, the naturalistic paradigm from [Lincoln and Guba \(1985\)](#) is utilized. In naturalistic research, four criteria ensure data quality are Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability. These four criteria form the foundation to ensure that naturalistic research produces trustworthy, high-quality, and beneficial findings.

Credibility refers to the extent to which research findings truly reflect the reality experienced and perceived by participants. To achieve this, researchers must engage for an extended period in the field (prolonged engagement), conduct in-depth observations on important aspects (persistent observation), utilize various data sources or methods (triangulation), and seek re-confirmation from participants regarding the findings or interpretations (member checking).

Next, transferability relates to how research findings can be applied or transferred to other contexts. Researchers are responsible for providing detailed and contextual descriptions (thick descriptions), but whether the findings are relevant elsewhere is left to the readers or users of the findings. Dependability emphasizes the importance of consistency in the research process, even though there may be changes in context or approach.

To ensure this, researchers create an audit trail, a complete record of all research steps and decisions, so that outsiders can verify whether the research was

conducted systematically and responsibly. Finally, confirmability ensures that the research findings are not merely the result of bias or the researcher's personal opinion but are truly supported by the collected data. The main strategy is to maintain an audit trail and practice reflexivity, which is the critical reflection of the researcher on their influence in the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Source of Stress for Parents of Autistic Children

Every parent experiences stress and has different sources of stress. Several sources of stress for parents of autistic children are summarized in four points: ignorance about autism leading to an inability to control tantrum behavior, rejection from society and extended family, the high costs of care and education, and concerns about the child's future when the parents pass away. These sources of stress are further detailed in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Sources of stress for parents of autistic children

Ignorance about autism	
Mrs. Y	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ignorance because they never knew about autism <p><i>I don't know anything about autism at all. I feel that there is something different about my child; he doesn't like being carried and tends not to interact when playing games like peek-a-boo. At the age of 3, my child dislikes making friends, is hyperactive, and is delayed in speaking. We are very stressed. Then we went to a pediatrician and were finally told that my child is autistic.</i></p>
Mrs. N	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ignorance in parenting and child development guidance <p><i>My child did not speak until the age of 3, was hyperactive, and had no communication. I see signs of autism; I know about autism because there is autism education at the kindergarten where I teach. I consulted with a psychologist and a pediatrician, and it turns out my child is autistic. Although I know about autism, I am still very confused about what I will do in the future. I often get emotional because of my child's tantrums, and I feel like I don't know what to do next.</i></p>
Mr. S	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents' ignorance about autism and the false myths that develop in the community environment <p><i>My child is the youngest and has four older sisters, all of whom are normal. At the age of three, my child does not want to make friends, is hyperactive, has difficulty communicating with others, and often talks to themselves unclearly. According to the elders, my child is being followed by ancestors (grandfathers) from the past. I took my child to a shaman (dukun) and visited many shamans (dukun). However, there was no progress until our child turned 7 years old. He still often got angry, which stressed us out. Finally, we went to a child development clinic, and the doctor diagnosed him with autistic. This year, our child has undergone therapy, and there has been noticeable progress in eye contact and the ability to calm down.</i></p>
Mrs. D	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ignorance about autism, false myths, and lack of social support for education. <p><i>I don't know about autism; I'm not an educated person. At first, everything was normal. Then, my child had a fever. According to the elders, my child was possessed by a spirit (bunian). From there, he started acting as if he were possessed and often got angry. Until now, at the age of 28, he has still been like that.</i></p>
Lack of social support: Rejection from the community and extended family	
Mrs. N	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rejection from the community, which does not yet understand autism, creates the stigma that autistic children are a source of problems.

	<i>I am afraid to take my child outside because of the reactions of neighbors who do not understand my child's tantrum behavior. The rejection from the neighbors happened, for example, by forbidding my child and even closing the door when N played outside. I never joined the family gatherings until N turned 11 because my child damaged the host's makeup equipment. After the age of 11, N became more stable, and only then did I start bringing him to socialize.</i>
	• The rejection of the presence of autistic children in large families, especially autistic boys from clans that pass down surnames
Mr. S	<i>Our child is the only son, and I am also the only child in my large family. For us Batak people, a son is the heir of the family name and wealth, and we have little hope for my child's condition like this. My extended family was also very disappointed, and I temporarily distanced myself from them.</i>
Mrs. Y	<i>My child is the third child and the only son in my family. My husband is very disappointed because, for the Batak people, inheriting the family name and the hopes of the extended family is very important. My husband temporarily withdrew from the family because he was embarrassed by the questions from other family members about our child. Not to mention when family members thought my husband had failed to pass on the family name. As a wife, I provided support, and ultimately, we focused on our child.</i>
Mrs. I	• The stigma that autistic children are the result of parent mistakes <i>I know my child is autistic and needs therapy. I always feel burdened by the expectations of society and my extended family, who believe that I should give birth to a smart and accomplished child just like me. When my child does not meet expectations, I feel like a failure. It is my reason for not seeking therapy and hiding my child. I am not ready to accept that my child is not experiencing any changes. I still love him. I provide good facilities and caregivers for my child.</i>
The high cost of care and education for autistic children	
Mrs. N	<i>We considered stopping N's therapy when he turned 10 years old. N's treatment and therapy cost more than the expenses for his older siblings' education from school to college. However, seeing N's significant progress, we eventually agreed to sell the land. In addition, his father took on a side job to earn extra income. Finally, the burden of caregiving fell solely on me while the father focused on earning extra income.</i>
Mr. S	<i>Buying a luxury house is enough if I add up the costs for S's treatment. I sought treatment with a healer (shaman) that cost considerably. This year, we have been undergoing therapy at a very high cost, but for me, there is satisfaction in seeing the progress.</i>
The certainty of their child's future when they are no longer around	
Mrs. I	<i>I hope he dies before I do. Because who is ready to take care of my child?</i>

Coping Strategies for Stress from Parents of Autistic Children

The strategy chosen by someone to overcome a problem is called a coping strategy. The choice of coping strategy depends on an individual's perspective on the problem based on their existing knowledge and experience. Parents who have autistic children often face unique challenges that require effective coping approaches. The coping strategies employed by parents of autistic children in Binjai City are summarized in the [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Coping strategies for stress among parents of autistic children

Problem-focused coping strategy	
• Searching for knowledge about autism	
Mrs. Y	<i>Besides consulting with doctors and therapy institutions, I attend seminars about autism. After attending the seminar, my stress levels decreased, and my enthusiasm for parenting my child increased.</i>

Mrs. N	<i>Since my child was diagnosed as autistic, what I have been doing is learning and understanding about autism, both in terms of how to handle and care for it, as well as the impact on the child's development and behavior.</i>
Mr. S	<i>In the past, I entrusted the healing to a shaman. After I learned from the doctor that my child is autistic. We learned about autism and what to do to care for him.</i>
• Creating a supportive environment	
Mrs. Y	<i>Y cannot hear loud noises but enjoys classical music. Finally, we created a special room for the therapist.</i>
Mrs. D	<i>For my family and environment, my child became stupid because of being affected by a spirit. No one told me about autism. I just resigned myself to it. I made a safe home for my child. In my house, there are no belongings because they are always damaged and also dangerous for him.</i>
Mrs. I	<i>I provided a safe playroom for him, which is separated from our main house.</i>
• Making a plan to intervene with children	
Mrs. Y	<i>I support the daily therapy activities that need to be done and learn to create communication with my child. I always ask and consult with the therapy center.</i>
Mrs. N	<i>I also always consult with mental health professionals, such as therapy institutions, to help determine the best care and support for child development and what I can do at home for home support.</i>
Mr. S	<i>Our child is undergoing therapy as recommended; we are doing everything that has been suggested. This year, therapy is still being conducted.</i>
• Focusing on the child's existing talents	
Mrs. Y	<i>I also only focused on Y's talent in classical music and computers. Not forcing it on anything else.</i>
Mrs. N	<i>N has a talent for drawing animations; I am more focused on developing N's talent.</i>
Emotion-focused coping strategy	
• Understanding acceptance and managing emotions	
Mrs. I	<i>Start accepting all of this gradually. Even though I didn't do therapy with him, I still took good care of him.</i>
Mrs. Y	<i>I was initially angry and blamed myself. I learned to accept my child as a gift from God. I believe God gives nothing bad.</i>
Mr. S	<i>Even though I am annoyed by my child's oddities, it is a normal reaction for me as a human. I will accept him as our beloved, special child.</i>
• Using spiritual practices as a way to calm the mind and heart	
Mrs. I	<i>I believe that God gives nothing bad. Every time I pray, I always pray for our well-being.</i>
Mrs. Y	<i>That stress will always be there; I always pour it out to God.</i>
Mrs. N	<i>I always pray to God in my prayers. After I pray, I always feel calm.</i>
Mrs. D	<i>I am more trusting and grateful because I am a special parent who has given me a special child. If I get upset, I pray during my tahajjud prayer, asking for patience. I am sure this special child will guide their parents to heaven later.</i>
Mr. S	<i>This child is my prayer for a son, and God granted it. I always pray to God to make me more patient.</i>
• Seeking help by talking to overcome mental health issues	
Mrs. I	<i>Stress will always be there. I always pour it out to God, but when I feel the need for a psychologist's help because, I am traumatized by sharing with friends or relatives.</i>
Mrs. Y	<i>At first, when I found out my child was autistic, I experienced depression. I consulted a psychologist, and now I no longer do because I see the progress Y has made because of our long struggle.</i>
Mrs. N	<i>When I once felt incapable, I told my close friend.</i>
Meaning Focused Strategy	
• Reflecting on their experiences and seeking meaning behind the challenges faced for a greater purpose.	
Mrs Y	<i>I am very happy to see Y's progress. Who is now independent but not like a normal child.</i>

Mrs N	<i>Teaching eating, urinating, and defecating alone becomes something difficult for an autistic child. Alhamdulillah is now very independent in eating and praying and can go to the bathroom alone. All of that has become a challenge for us.</i>
Mrs S	<i>We will not go back to the past, believing in the supernatural for the treatment of our autistic child. We consult with doctors and therapists to support his development.</i>
• Meaning-Making Through the Parenting Journey	
Mrs Y	<i>This process is difficult for us; we support each other and only focus on our children. Every small development, no matter how minor, brings us joy.</i>
Mrs N	<i>When I was almost in despair, his father reminded me that this was a challenge for us, that it was not impossible, and that God gave us greater rewards.</i>
• Building closeness within the entire family that their autistic sibling is a unique and valuable part.	
Mrs Y	<i>We also provide education to his other siblings, and his older siblings love him very much and see their autistic brother as a beautiful part of life, not a burden.</i>
Mrs N	<i>His older siblings love N very much because we say their younger sibling is special. If I leave, N will already be able to be with his siblings.</i>
Social coping strategy	
• Searching for and joining a community of parents of autistic children	
Mrs Y	<i>I joined the online community for parents of autistic children because I couldn't find that community in Binjai City.</i>
Mrs N	<i>I joined an online community of parents of autistic children because there isn't one in Binjai. Joining the community allows us to share feelings and knowledge. Meeting with other parents boosts our enthusiasm for raising our autistic child.</i>
• Attending a seminar to meet with parents of autistic children	
Mrs Y	<i>I also attended a seminar, met with parents, and participated in learning about autism.</i>

This research gathered information from people closest to the environment to see the influence of coping strategies on child development. The results of the interviews with supporting informants are summarized in the [Table 4](#).

Table 4. Results of Interviews with Supporting Informants

NS	<i>Indeed, Mrs. Y and Mrs. N are more cooperative regarding their child's development. The development of Y and N also reaches a level appropriate for their age, namely high school, where they are very independent and able to communicate, although certainly not like a normal child. Their parents were able to discover their children's potential. For example, Y has computer skills in coding, and N has skills in graphic design and drawing on the computer.</i>
TS	<i>The mother loves her child very much. All their needs are met. I sometimes throw tantrums if disturbed or if my wishes are not fulfilled. As a caregiver, I only fulfill his wishes. He should be in middle school at his age but not in school. He still needs help using the bathroom. So that he doesn't throw a tantrum, my mother told me to avoid what he doesn't want.</i>
SB	<i>My brother is usually just quiet every day. Sometimes, he gets angry and throws things if he doesn't like something. The mother did nothing to the older brother because of her ignorance about autism. Mother graduated from junior high school, and her friends are women who sell at the Traditional Market. They said it was just a disturbance by a spirit (kesambet), and when the mother took her son to the doctor, there was no education about autism either.</i>

DISCUSSION

Sources of stress for parents of autistic children

This research found that all parents were aware of the autistic symptoms in their children by age 3 or older. Although some parents noticed signs of autism that had appeared from a young age, such as the child showing a tendency to resist being carried and held and lacking eye contact, the parents thought it was a form of the child's independence and something normal. Parents only truly realize the situation when the child reaches age 3, showing disinterest in social interactions, hyperactivity, and speech delays.

Sacrey et al. (2015) found that parent concerns about social-communication delays, such as lack of response to name or language delays, often emerge around 12 to 24 months of age. However, an official diagnosis of autism usually occurs later, around the ages of 3 to 5 years, due to various factors, including parents' initial interpretation of the child's behavior and delays in seeking professional evaluation.

Every parent experiences stress and has different sources of stress. Several sources of stress for parents of autistic children in the city of Binjai can be summarized into four main points: lack of knowledge about autism leading to an inability to control tantrum behavior, rejection from society and extended family, high costs of care and education, and concerns about the child's future when the parents are no longer alive.

The source of stress initially comes from ignorance about autism, so parents do not know what to do for their autistic child. Even though they already have some initial knowledge about autism, parents of autistic children also experience confusion in planning the care and support for their child's development. Knowledge helps parents understand what to do for caregiving and support, thereby reducing the stress of caregiving (Falk et al., 2014; Siu et al., 2019).

Parents' ignorance about autism and the myths that develop in the community, such as hyperactive children being caused by spirits or disturbances from ancestors (*opung*), lead to incorrect and delayed handling of autistic children. Parents provide treatment for autism to parties who are not competent to handle it, such as shamans. The myths that occur in society create negative perceptions that can be detrimental to autistic children (Bennett et al., 2018; Collier, 2018). Parents' ignorance about autism, false myths, and the lack of social support for autism education cause parents to let their child's development proceed without intervention.

The second source of stress for parents in Binjai City is the negative stigma towards autistic children, leading to rejection from society and extended family. The community considers autistic children to be the cause of problems due to tantrums and unpredictable behavior. Parents are often viewed as incapable and failing in raising their children (Boyle, 2018; Ng & Ng, 2022). The societal stigma that the birth of an autistic child is a disgrace and a mistake of the parents,

especially the mother, leads parents to hide the presence of their autistic child. These stigmas cause parents to withdraw socially.

For tribes where male children are the heirs of the clan (*Batak, Karo, Mandailing*), having an autistic male child becomes a significant source of stress for the parents. The stigma from the extended family that an autistic child is considered unable to provide hope as a successor to the clan and happiness for the parents (Masyhuri et al., 2020), triggers parents to withdraw from the family (Daulay, 2018; Wu, 2019). The stigmas from the social environment built today affect a person's life experiences and actions in the future (Yaacob et al., 2021).

The source of stress for parents of autistic children in Binjai City also comes from economic factors. Parents with a lower-middle economic status struggle with the high costs of care, therapy, and education for their autistic children. Research from Jannah (2020) revealed that parents of children with special needs who come from lower-middle economic backgrounds are affected by their children's needs. The high cost of care and education for autistic children also causes stress for their parents. Therapy and school are very expensive, often leading parents to consider stopping therapy for their child. However, knowing that this therapy is crucial for the child's development, parents are willing to postpone buying a house or sell their assets, such as land or houses they own.

To address this economic issue, the role of the father of an autistic child as the breadwinner must be more demanding. Fathers must seek side jobs to cover the high costs of raising, therapy, and education for autistic children. This hinders fathers of autistic children from having enough time to be directly involved in caregiving. Asfari (2022) expressed that the father of a child with special needs is not directly involved in caregiving, one of the factors being financial.

The source of stress for parents of autistic children in Binjai City is the certainty of their child's future when they have passed away. Ilias et al. (2018) expressed that the parents of autistic children are very worried about their child's future because autistic children will not recover like other typical children and must be accompanied for life. Although autistic children have exceptional talents that can generate income, job empowerment for autistic children is very limited.

Coping with stress as a parent of an autistic child

The way and effort chosen by someone to overcome a problem is called coping (Plaza et al., 2017). Parents who experience high stress tend to feel more anxious and frustrated, which can affect the way they interact with their children. This can reduce their ability to provide the necessary emotional support. In addition, stress can interfere with parents' ability to make good decisions regarding parenting methods. They may be more likely to make impulsive decisions or decisions that are not based on accurate information. Managing stress well has a significant positive impact on the perception of future planning for autistic children. With the right support and stress management strategies, parents can

be more effective in providing an environment that supports their child's development.

The first coping strategy is problem-focused, where parents concentrate on addressing the problems caused by the stressor. Conceptually, coping with a problem-focused strategy is carried out to reduce stress by learning new things or skills. This means responding by focusing on changing the situation, followed by an analytical approach to problem-solving (Biggs et al., 2017). In this study, the forms of coping behavior that emerge among parents of autistic children in Binjai City include seeking knowledge about autism, planning interventions for the child, creating a safe and conducive supportive environment for their autistic child, and focusing on the child's existing talents.

The second coping strategy is emotion-focused, which aims to reduce negative emotions associated with the problem. It involves individual efforts to manage emotional responses to highly stressful situations and aims to regulate these responses to perceived stressors. In this context, the condition of an autistic child is viewed as a situation that requires a positive emotional response, acceptance of the circumstances, and the use of religion as a source of strength (Biggs et al., 2017). The form of emotion-focused coping employed by parents of autistic children in Binjai City includes understanding acceptance and managing emotions, using prayer and spiritual practices as a way to calm the mind and heart, and seeking help by sharing stories to address mental health.

The third coping strategy is meaning-focused, in which an individual uses cognitive strategies to obtain and manage the meaning of the situation. Here, meaning refers to seeking purpose and goals in facing the challenges and difficulties of caring for a child with autism. This strategy helps individuals find meaning in stressful situations by managing emotional responses to stress rather than just solving the problem (Biggs et al., 2017). Some ways that parents of autistic children implement this third coping strategy include reflecting on and seeking meaning behind the challenges faced for a greater purpose, understanding that the journey of parenting is not an easy process, and realizing that every small step taken provides meaning and can be transformed into an advantage, fostering closeness within the entire family, as their autistic sibling is a unique and highly valuable part.

The fourth coping strategy, Social Coping (seeking support), aims to reduce stress by seeking emotional or instrumental support from the community. Social support can provide emotional assistance, information, and resources that are beneficial for the knowledge of parents of autistic children (Biggs et al., 2017). Parents of autistic children in Binjai City employ social coping strategies (seeking support) to manage their stress in several ways, such as seeking out and joining communities of parents of autistic children and attending seminars to connect with other parents of autistic children. This research found that parents of autistic children participate in online communities, as there are no in-person parent communities for autistic children in Binjai City.

This study shows that parents of autistic children who implement all four stress-coping strategies have better emotional control compared to parents who only use one or two of the strategies. The parents of autistic children can make informed decisions in the upbringing and support of their autistic child's development. They can guide their children to develop better and even discover the potential within them that can be managed as strengths. There is a relationship between parent stress management and the upbringing, support, and discovery of their autistic child's potential talents.

This research also shows that family and social environment support plays a more significant role than the parents' educational background. The high educational background of parents and their expertise in education should equip them to support the upbringing and development of their autistic child, but this does not happen. The stigma from the family that considers their child to be a result of stress during their education, as well as the negative perception from society that parents have failed to produce exceptional offspring, has caused stress for the parents of autistic children.

This stress causes to distance themselves from and hide their autistic child from the social environment, even allowing their child to grow and develop without any intervention. Parents of autistic children need social support and professional guidance from social workers so that family members can implement more positive coping strategies. Therefore, social support from the community and family is important for parents of autistic children (Chukwu et al. (2019); Furrukh & Anjum, 2020; Hizbullah & Mulyati, 2022).

This research reveals that parents with autistic children in Binjai City face complex challenges in fulfilling their caregiving roles. The main challenges include the high cost of therapy, limited access to adequate healthcare services, and the family's unfavorable economic conditions. Many parents, especially from lower-middle economic backgrounds, struggle to obtain information about autism and to finance routine therapies such as occupational, speech, and behavioral therapy. Providing educational facilities to the community through socialization about autism, parent counseling, and therapy services is very important to implement. Community health centers managed by the government, which are easily accessible and free, will be beneficial for parents of autistic children from middle educational and economic backgrounds. In the study by Boshoff et al. (2016), it is stated that the accessibility of healthcare, education, and therapists is very important for parents of autistic children.

Islamic psychology review on stress coping strategies for parents of autistic children

Stress coping strategies from the perspective of Islamic psychology have spiritual, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions based on Islamic values (Rahman, 2015). Islam is viewed as a comprehensive religion (*syumul*); therefore, when we talk about stress, which is a study of the mind and one of the important components of psychology, religion cannot simply be disregarded (Haque, 2018).

The Islamic psychological review of stress coping strategies for parents of autistic children is a discussion on parent stress coping examined within the framework of Islamic studies. This study found that the parents implemented four coping strategies.

Parents use emotion-focused coping strategies by understanding acceptance and managing emotions. They believe this is God's will and that no gift from God is without goodness. Parents of autistic children gradually accept and take good care of their children. Islam views every life test, including having a child with autism, as part of God's decree (*qadar*) that must be accepted with full patience (*ṣabr*) and trust (*tawakkal*). Patience (*ṣabr*) in facing various challenges, such as managing the child's behavior, dealing with social stigma, and meeting the child's educational and therapeutic needs, is crucial in maintaining the emotional balance of parents. The Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah: verse 153 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) states, "*God is with those who are patient*," so this belief can be a source of strength for parents of autistic children in facing their life's trials.

Meanwhile, tawakkal means entrusting all matters to God after making the most effort. The Qur'an, Surah Ali Imran verse 59 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) states, "*So when you have made a decision, then put your trust in God*." Indeed, God loves those who put their trust in Him. By understanding this concept, parents can be more sincere in facing challenges and reduce the psychological pressure from their child's condition. In the context of parents of autistic children, tawakkul can help them avoid excessive stress because they realize that everything happens by the will of God. Thus, they are better able to accept the situation without feeling emotionally burdened ([Achour et al., 2016](#)).

The Qur'an, in Surah Ali Imran: verse 139 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) states, "*And do not be weak, nor be sad, for you will have the upper hand if you are true believers*." Buya Hamka, in Tafsir Al Azhar ([Hamka, 2021](#)), interprets this verse as a warning from God to Muslims not to feel weak or sorrowful, especially after experiencing defeat in the Battle of Uhud. The verse aims to revive the spirit of the Muslims momentarily shaken by that defeat. This verse emphasizes that weakness and sadness are traits that believers should not possess. On the contrary, strong faith will elevate their status in the eyes of Allah and humanity. As servants of God, Islam teaches us to remain optimistic and confident in facing trials and tribulations. A strong faith will be a source of strength that prevents despair and prolonged sadness. This verse also emphasizes the importance of making faith the main foundation in facing life's challenges. With strong faith, Muslims will be able to rise from adversity and achieve victory, both in this world and the hereafter. Buya Hamka's interpretation shows that the Qur'an provides spiritual guidance and practical solutions for various life problems. Through this verse, Muslims are encouraged to maintain spirit and optimism and to make faith a source of strength in facing all trials.

Next, the emotion-focused coping strategy employed by the parents of autistic children involves using spiritual practices to calm their minds and hearts, such as performing prayers, praying, reciting dhikr, reading and contemplating the Quran, and pouring their heart's burdens out to God. The Quran in Surah Ar Ra'd verse 28 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) states, "*Those who believe and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of God.*" Remember that the heart will always be at peace only by remembering God. The spiritual activities autistic children perform are a way to remember and draw closer to God. *Dhikr* and prayer performed regularly have proven to help parents manage pressure and stress. Research by [Miftahuddin et al. \(2019\)](#) shows that *dhikr* therapy conducted with a systematic approach can enhance the mental tranquility of parents caring for autistic children. Besides *dhikr*, reading and listening to the recitation of the holy verses of the Quran also have therapeutic effects. [Zakiyah \(2023\)](#) states that the therapy of reading and listening to the Quran can provide psychological tranquility. Support for these findings is reinforced by several studies that have found that regularly reading and listening to the Quran can reduce anxiety levels and improve mental health ([WNA et al., 2022](#); [Mahjoob et al., 2016](#)). From the perspective of acceptance, religiosity shows a positive relationship with parents' acceptance of their autistic child's condition. The higher the level of religiosity, the greater the child's acceptance of trust from God ([Alsa et al., 2021](#); [Pratama, 2024](#); [Rahmawati, 2018](#)). Equally important, the concept of *muraqabah* or mindfulness in Islam – namely, full awareness of God's presence – also plays a significant role in parenting. *Muraqabah* can help parents remain patient, sincere, and focused, allowing emotions to be better controlled and spiritual life to be more balanced ([Abdolhoseini et al., 2023](#); [Salkas et al., 2016](#)).

Next, the emotion-focused coping strategy employed by parents is seeking help by sharing their stories to address mental health if they feel overwhelmed by the existing stress. In the review of Islamic psychology, sharing stories or venting is known as a form of *taushiyah* (mutual advice in goodness) and *tazkiyah* (purification of the soul), which is highly recommended as part of the inner healing process. In Islam, this is not considered a weakness but a part of *tawassul bil-haqq*, which advises and supports each other in truth and patience. As taught in the Quran Surah Al 'Asr, verses 1-3 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) states: "*By time. Indeed, mankind is in loss. Except for those who believe and do righteous deeds, and advise each other to adhere to the truth and advise each other to remain patient.*" From a psychological perspective, this method aims to reduce the emotional burden caused by stressors that cannot be immediately resolved. Sharing stories, known in psychotherapy as venting, can be important. [Armajayanthi et al. \(2017\)](#) found that parents, especially mothers of children with autism, tend to choose emotional coping strategies such as crying and sharing stories with close friends or fellow mothers of children with special needs. This approach provides a sense of being understood, enhances social empathy, and reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Furthermore, the social support obtained through sharing stories also has positive physiological effects. According to research by [Marettih and Wahdani \(2017\)](#), parents of autistic children who actively seek emotional support through counselors, teachers, or community members have lower levels of mental fatigue. This strategy becomes stronger when accompanied by a spiritual approach, such as *dhikr* and prayer, reinforcing the belief that trials are part of God's destiny that brings wisdom. Thus, the emotion-focused coping strategy through storytelling is not merely an emotional release tool but part of a spiritual path toward inner peace and closeness to God. This approach balances the psychological and spiritual aspects of Islam and has been scientifically proven to enhance the psychological resilience of parents caring for children with special needs.

Patience (*sabr*) and *tawakkul* in Islam mean enduring difficulties and striving to find the best solutions; this is part of problem-focused coping. In this study, parents of autistic children employ a problem-focused strategy by seeking knowledge about autism, creating a supportive environment, and planning interventions for their child. This strategy aligns with the principles of Islamic psychology, which encourage the faithful to strive, seek knowledge, and place their trust in God when facing life's trials.

The Qur'an, Surah Al-Mujadila, verse 11 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) states, "*God will elevate those among you who believe and those who have been given knowledge by degrees.*" It emphasizes the importance of effort and knowledge in facing difficulties. This verse shows that seeking knowledge, including knowledge about autism and how to handle it, is a noble and recommended action in Islam.

The knowledge and science sought must be based on the true teachings of Islam (not associating partners with God). In this study, it was found that belief in myths prevalent in society leads parents of autistic children to believe that their child's treatment should be handled by a shaman (*dukun*). In Islam, the practice of consulting or seeking help from shamans is strictly prohibited and does not follow religious teachings, as it may involve elements of shirk, which is associating God with something else.

The Quran explains in Surah Al-Luqman, verse 13 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) which states: "*And (remember) when Luqman said to his son while he was advising him, O my son, do not associate anything with God. Indeed, associating partners with God is a great injustice.*" Next, sincere efforts (*ikhtiar*) following true knowledge must be accompanied by trust in God. As mentioned in Surah Al-Imran verse 159 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) states: "*Then when you have made a decision, put your trust in God.*" This verse teaches that after making plans and putting in maximum effort, a Muslim should fully entrust the outcome to God.

In coping with a meaning-focused strategy, parents of autistic children reflect on their experiences and seek meaning behind the challenges they face for a greater purpose, understanding that the journey of parenting is not easy and that every

small step can be a strength, as well as fostering the closeness of the entire family, making the presence of an autistic sibling very valuable. Islam views every life test as a form of compassion and a mechanism to purify the soul and elevate a person's spiritual status. Parents of autistic children often face significant emotional, social, and physical pressures.

However, in Islam, all these burdens become a form of *taklif* (religious duty) that is honored. Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 286 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) implies: "God does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear." This verse emphasizes that the trust of raising a child with special needs is not a burden but rather a choice from God for those who possess the spiritual and emotional capacity to handle it all.

Reflecting on life experiences and seeking meaning behind every trial is important to the spiritual process. Every challenge faced is surely accompanied by ease, and parents can find meaning in their journey of raising an autistic child. As mentioned in the Quran ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)), "*Indeed, with hardship comes ease*" (QS. Al-Insyirah: 6).

The hadith of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), narrated by Imam At-Tirmidhi, states, "*Indeed, the greater the trial, the greater the reward. And indeed, when God loves a people, He will test them*" ([Al-Albani, 2015](#)). This hadith provides a spiritual framework that parents raising autistic children are traversing a path full of blessings and trials. In Islamic psychology, this experience encourages the formation of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul) through patience (*ṣabr*), sincerity (*ikhhlās*), and deep surrender (*tawakkul*). When parents begin to reflect on their role as companions to autistic children, they become aware that the child is not a burden but rather a part of a destiny rich with meaning and potential reward. This understanding creates a spiritual resilience that goes beyond mere logical acceptance.

In the reality of family, the guardianship of all family members becomes an obligation. In the Quran, Surah At-Tahrim verse 6 ([Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, 2020](#)) says, "*O you who have believed, protect yourselves and your families from a Fire.*" Maintaining and supporting each other within the family is a very important responsibility. The presence of an autistic child in the family can trigger a collective awareness of the importance of maintaining harmony, unconditional love, and mutual support in facing challenges together. [Musayaroh et al. \(2016\)](#) found that parents of autistic children often use reframing strategies, which involve changing their perspective on difficult situations to a more positive one, seeking spiritual support, and mobilizing family support, as the three most frequently used coping strategies. These strategies help parents view challenges as opportunities for personal growth and strengthen family bonds. Other studies have also proven that parents develop positive personality traits, enhance their spiritual faith, and have a greater appreciation for life. This study emphasizes the need for increased resources and

support for families to mitigate their experiences with autism ([Higgins et al., 2023](#)).

In the social coping strategy, parents of autistic children seek and join communities of parents with autistic children and attend seminars to gather with other parents of autistic children. This strategy aligns with the principle of *ta'awun* (mutual assistance) in Islam. Quran Surah Al-Ma'idah verse 2 emphasizes, "*And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression.*" By joining the community of parents of autistic children, they not only share experiences and strategies but also strengthen the emotional and spiritual solidarity that is greatly needed in facing the heavy psychological burden. In a hadith narrated by Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "*The example of the believers in their mutual love, mercy, and compassion is like a single body; if one part of the body feels pain, the whole body responds with sleeplessness and fever*" ([Sunnah.com, 2024](#)). It emphasizes the importance of social support in Islam as a form of collective compassion among the community. Psychologically, social support has been proven to reduce stress and strengthen parents' resilience. [Hidayah et al. \(2017\)](#) showed that parents of autistic children often use constructive coping strategies that include seeking informational and social support, as well as spiritual approaches. Coping is worldly, spiritual, and religiously meaningful. Similarly, the study by [Khoirunnisa et al. \(2023\)](#) identifies that effective coping includes self-motivation, self-efficacy, and active involvement in social networks as key factors in successfully managing the pressures of parenting a child with special needs.

CONCLUSIONS

This research showed that parents of autistic children experience various complex sources of stress, including ignorance about autism, social stigma, economic problems, and concerns about their child's future. Although some parents notice the symptoms of autism when their child is three years old, many do not recognize the early signs that indicate the need for special care. This ignorance often leads to improper and delayed handling and misunderstandings rooted in societal myths and stigma.

When facing stress, parents adopt various coping strategies. They can use problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused, and social support approaches to manage the stress they experience. These strategies include seeking knowledge about autism, creating a supportive environment, and seeking support from the community. Parents who use a combination of coping strategies are better able to manage emotions and provide the necessary support for their child's development. The importance of social support and education about autism is also highly emphasized. Community involvement and family support can help parents feel more connected and reduce parental stress. Furthermore, government policies that provide educational facilities and health

support for parents and autistic children are essential to addressing the challenges faced.

Finally, the approach of Islamic psychology provides a valuable perspective in coping with the stress of parents of autistic children. Parents can find peace and hope in their parenting journey through patience and trust in God, spiritual support, and acceptance of reality. The combination of social support, education, and spirituality is key to helping parents cope with stress and improve the quality of life for themselves and their children. This research has limitations because it examines informants limited to one approach. Future research is expected to conduct studies with a larger number of informants or respondents and use mixed methods or other approaches.

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