

**The Psychosocial and Spiritual Challenges of Christian Parents of Children with
Autism Primarily in South India**

Eben Abraham Samuel

(This research article is a brief extract of an unpublished thesis submitted towards a Master of Arts in Family Life Education at Urban India Ministries Family Research and Training Institute. Eben Samuel is a Family Family Educator from UIM FRTI and is currently serving at Hosur Brethren Church. He can be reached at eben92@gmail.com)

Abstract

This article explores the ‘Psychosocial and Spiritual challenges of Christian Parents of children with Autism primarily in South India’. The purpose of the study was to understand the psychological, social and spiritual challenges of Christian parents of children with autism in South India with a view of understanding specific coping methods that the Christian parents use to overcome their challenges. The research is also aimed at educating the churches to be part of the wider support system to these families. This is a pivotal and much-needed study because of the severity of challenges that Christian parents of Autistic children face and the much-needed support they require to cope with all the challenges that come their way.

Keywords

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Christian parents, psychosocial challenges, spiritual challenges, South India.

Based on prior experience with autistic children from known church families, there was a stark realization that there’s a lot of stigma attached to *Autism Spectrum Disorder* in our country, India, even among Christian believers. The numbers are shocking too; a study done by Neurology India in 2019 reports that *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)* not only

affects the child and the family. “It also has direct and indirect cost implications on the nation that are incurred in providing health care, support for education, and rehabilitative services” (Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder in Indian children). There is a lack of evidence-based estimate of the population prevalence of ASD in India.

ASD is a worldwide concern and its estimated prevalence is 1% in the United Kingdom and 1.5% in the United States. India is a populous country of nearly 1.3 billion people with children ≤ 15 years constituting nearly one-third of the population. It has been estimated that more than 2 million people might be affected with ASD in India. (Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder in Indian children)

These significant statistics of children suffering from ASD in India and worldwide, was the key driver behind this research which sought to understand the psychosocial and spiritual challenges of Christian parents of Children with autism in South India. The quantitative method was used to find the psychosocial and spiritual challenges of parents of Children with Autism. The study was guided primarily by two research questions. First, what challenges do Christian parents of children with autism in South India encounter? Secondly, what specific coping method(s) did the Christian parents of children with Autism use to overcome the challenges they've faced? Twenty-nine Christian parents of children with Autism from different parts of South India participated in this quantitative research, to answer the forty-six questions related to this study. Research question #1 helped the researcher to find some of the key challenges parents of Children with Autism are facing. Research question #2 explained how the parents of children with Autism cope up with the challenges they were facing and the most important findings are highlighted here.

Literature Review

Literature review was done first to understand - the psychosocial and spiritual challenges of Christian Parents of Children With Autism (PCWA) in South India. Secondly,

to understand the biblical and theological foundation for the topic. Thirdly, to explain the role of Churches in providing adequate support for PCWA. The challenges of PCWA in South India and its outcome and the methodology that helped achieve the purpose of this research was reviewed.

Ron Sandison in his book ‘a parent’s guide to autism’ gives practical advice and biblical wisdom on ASD and also on parenting a child with ASD. The effect of ASD on a child is enormous, it is very different from a normal child. Understanding these different behavioral patterns is the challenge that parents of children with Autism face.

With variations across children, a diagnosis of ASD impacts every facet of functioning from academic engagement and development to peer relationships and the family system and greatly narrows potential options of occupation and growth into adulthood. Many individuals on the spectrum have severely impaired communication resulting in poor social skills and isolation from community-based activities and interactions. ASD knows no barriers and impacts individuals across social and geographical boundaries and is termed as a lifelong disorder, that affects the individual into adulthood. (Parental attitude and expectations in raising a child with autism spectrum disorder in India)

Parents play a vital part in the development of children with Autism.

It is recognized that the view from the lens of the parent often differs from that of the scientific community, and when posed with a parenting problem, they instinctively look for answers within their religion, family or local community and explore alternative treatments that are aligned with their community and culture. The parent plays a central role in the intervention process, making it imperative that services are culturally sensitive and acceptable to them. Parental beliefs are reflected in everyday

routines and activities, influencing the development of the child. (Parental attitude and expectations in raising a child with autism spectrum disorder in India)

The challenges faced by the parents include critical decision making, the increased stress levels with decreased social activities. In the book 'A Strange World – Autism, Asperger's Syndrome and PDD-NOS', Martine F. Delfos talks about what exactly ASD is, where he explains the social and emotional development and classification of children with autism and the areas we need to focus on. The responsibility of parents before and after the diagnosis is very crucial. Parents need to help autistic children in developing social skills and friendship and relationships. PCWA struggle with feelings of inferiority, jealousy and depression so they need a lot of help in coping with anxiety, obsession, aggression and social anxiety.

Giving ample help and support for PCWA is very important. In the article, "Four practical ways to welcome autism into your church", Sheila Gosney talks about how our church can be an environment where children with autism and other disabilities are welcome.

Four practical ways,

1. Gain understanding
2. A safe haven
3. A team approach
4. Reducing problems

Methodology

A quantitative study was used to find the psychosocial and spiritual challenges of PCWA. The research design that is used here is a quantifiable method to measure the challenges of Christian parents of children with Autism. The data collection methods involve sending questionnaires, telephonic conversations, emails, and social media channels to analyze the phenomena and through those means access the participants involved in the research.

The primary participants are Christian parents of children with autism (PCWA) in South India. The main criteria for selecting the participants were that they should be Christian parents of children with autism in South India.

The quantitative research design was used for this study and administered to a selected PCWA of 29 participants. The survey involved questions that would help understand the challenges PCWA are facing and the kind of support they are seeking.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this study.

Research Question #1

What challenges have Christian parents of children with autism in South India encountered?

The main purpose of this question was to know the different challenges PCWA encounters. Exploring the world of Autism Spectrum Disorder from a medical, psychological, social, relational and spiritual point of view. This was particularly to understand the challenges of Christian PCWA in South India. This being the quantitative methodology, the researcher began the survey by a designed questionnaire to answer how children with autism affect the PCWA psychologically, socially and spiritually.

Research Question #2

What specific approaches did the Christian parents of children with autism in south India use to cope up with the challenges?

This question was primarily to understand how the parents are overcoming the challenges and to know the kind of support they require from the people around them (family, church, society etc.).

Findings

This research unearthed six major challenges Christian parents of children with Autism in South India face. One, Christian parents of children with Autism are often in a state of mental agony and stress. Two, Christian parents of children with Autism struggle with parental insecurities and depression. Three, Christian parents of children with Autism find it difficult to get the right medical care and education for their children. Four, Christian parents of children with Autism feel the society is Judgmental towards children with ASD and their families. Five, Christian parents of children with Autism experienced a considerable amount of rejection and criticism from their families and churches. Six, some Christian parents of children with Autism experienced spiritual dryness.

As a result of this research four coping methods were found which were adopted by Christian parents of children with Autism. One, Christian parents of children with Autism cope up with the challenges by trusting in God and by seeing their child as a unique gift from God. Two, Christian PCWA cope up with the challenges with the support of their friends, family and church. Three, Christian parents of children with Autism cope up with the challenges by the help of their child's school and hospital. Finally Christian parents of Children with autism cope up with their challenges by being flexible in their parental responsibilities.

Recommendations

We must acknowledge and understand that the challenges of PCWA are diverse and intense. We should never judge, look down or discriminate against children with Autism/special needs or their parents. Rather we need to sympathize with them, treat them equally with dignity and respect them just like how God treats them. Also, churches need to take the ministry to the special needs kids and their family seriously. Christian parents of children with Autism want the church to come alongside them in their journey by loving,

educating, caring, serving, encouraging, supporting and praying for them and their child. Churches should find out about activities, and skills for special needs kids from within our church members so as to build a loving and giving Christ-like outreach community of love and care. One of the most difficult things for Christian PCWA in South India is the financial burden it brings on the parents due to multiple appointments for their child's education and medical care. So, most Christian parents of children with Autism would like the church to financially support them. They want their children to be included in Sunday schools and to have Sunday school teachers who are sensitive to children. Encourage qualified people to open up good and affordable schools, centers and hospitals for children with autism from any religion and culture. See this as an opportunity to show the love of Christ, especially to people from other faiths.

Conclusion

The study concludes by reinforcing the stark reality that Christian parents of children with Autism go through a lot of psychological, social and spiritual challenges. It is so evident that all the struggles are real, unique and serious because it pretty much affects all the areas of their life. The mental and emotional agony and pain PCWA go through is the most difficult of all the challenges they face. Hence it requires instantaneous attention and help from God, family, society and churches to cope up with the challenges.

Works Cited

12 amazing facts about South India you should definitely be aware of. *Https://Wirally.Com/*.

<https://wirally.com/facts-about-south-india/>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2020.

Roy, Alip. (15 April 2018). *School In Heaven*. *Flickr*,

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/60411053@N03/40011418260/>.

Best autism treatment center in India. *Neurogen BSI*.

<https://www.neurogenbsi.com/autism-treatment-center-in-mumbai>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2020.

Child with autistic spectrum disorder: Care from the family.

http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1414-81452018000400232. Accessed 20 Apr. 2021.

Disability and the sovereign goodness of God. (2012). *www.desiringgod.org*,

<https://www.desiringgod.org/books/disability-and-the-sovereign-goodness-of-god>.

Kumar, Ranjit. (2010). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners*. SAGE Publications.

Macaskill, Grant. (2019). *Autism and the church (bible theology and community)*. Baylor University Press.

Sharma, Narottam. Quantitative Research Instruments. *slideshare*.

<https://www.slideshare.net/NarottamDevSharma/quantitative-research-instruments>.

Gosney, Sheila. 'God only gives special needs children to special people' (Or does He?).

Revive Our Hearts,

<https://www.reviveourhearts.com/true-woman/blog/god-only-gives-special-needs-children-to-special-p/>. Accessed 30 Aug. 2020.

Parental attitude and expectations in raising a child with autism spectrum disorder in India.

ResearchGate, doi:10.9790/0837-2508015056. Accessed 30 Aug. 2020.

Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder in Indian children: A systematic review and

meta-analysis." *ResearchGate*,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331662550_Prevalence_of_autism_spectrum_disorder_in_Indian_children_A_systematic_review_and_meta-Analysis. Accessed 27 Aug. 2020.

What is autism? *Autism Speaks*. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2020.

What is quantitative research? Definition, uses and methods.” *Scribbr*, <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/quantitative-research/>. Accessed 12 June 2020.