



Family Resilience, Coping, and Adaptation among Households Raising Adolescents with Disabilities, Including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Implications for Social Work Practice and Inclusive Social Protection Policies

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Abstract

Families raising adolescents with disabilities, specifically those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, regularly face dense emotional, social, and economic challenges that require substantial resilience and adaptive capacity. This study investigates patterns of family resilience, coping strategies, and adaptive behaviors among families raising adolescents with disabilities in Karachi, Pakistan. The research seeks to comprehend how families pass through caregiving responsibilities, social expectations, and functional limitations while maintaining family well-being and stability. A mixed-method research design was employed to provide a thorough understanding of these experiences. Quantitative data were collected from a purposive sample of 75 families representing distinct socioeconomic backgrounds across Karachi. Statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics and correlation tests, was conducted to examine relationships between family cohesion, handling mechanisms, and adaptive outcomes. In addition, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected caregivers to obtain their lived experiences, emotional responses, and strategies for managing routine challenges associated with raising adolescents with disabilities. The findings indicate that strong family cohesion, emotional attachment among family members, and access to community-based support systems substantially contribute to positive family adjustment and resilience. Families that employed adaptive coping approaches—such as collaborative problem-solving, seeking social support, and maintaining positive family communication—demonstrated remarkable psychological stability and caregiving effectiveness. However, several structural barriers endure. Financial strain related to healthcare, therapy, and education services was reported as a major stressor, particularly among lower-income households. Likewise, social stigma and limited public awareness about developmental disabilities continue to affect families' social participation and access to inclusive opportunities. The study features the critical role of social work practice, community engagement, and inclusive social protection policies in supporting family resilience. It suggests the development of targeted family-centered involvements, improved access to support services, and policy frameworks that encourage disability inclusion and caregiver support in developing urban perspectives. These measures can boost the adaptive capacity of families and improve the overall well-welfare of adolescents with disabilities.

Keywords: Family Resilience; Disability; Adolescents with Disabilities; Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); Coping Strategies; Family Adaptation; Social Work Practice; Inclusive Social Protection; Caregiver Support.



Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage characterized by rapid physical growth, psychological transformation, and increasing social engagement. During this phase, individuals gradually develop independence, identity, and social competence. However, adolescents living with disabilities often experience additional challenges that affect their developmental trajectory and social participation. Among developmental conditions, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has received increasing global attention due to its complex characteristics, including difficulties in communication, restricted patterns of behavior, and challenges in social interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). These challenges influence not only the lives of adolescents but also the functioning and well-being of their families.

Families are the primary caregivers and support systems for adolescents with disabilities. Parents and caregivers typically assume multiple roles that include providing emotional care, managing healthcare services, coordinating educational support, and advocating for the rights of their children. These responsibilities can create significant psychological and financial pressures for families. Research indicates that parents of children with developmental disabilities often report higher levels of stress, anxiety, and caregiving burden compared with families raising non-disabled children (Hayes & Watson, 2013).

The concept of family resilience has emerged as a valuable framework for understanding how families cope with adversity. Family resilience refers to the capacity of family systems to withstand and adapt positively to stressful circumstances while maintaining functional relationships and emotional stability (Ahmed et al., 2023). Resilient families often develop adaptive coping mechanisms, such as strong communication, emotional support among family members, collaborative problem-solving, and engagement with community resources. These processes enable families to manage caregiving challenges while maintaining a sense of stability and hope.

In the context of disability, resilience becomes particularly important because caregiving responsibilities often extend throughout the life course of the child. Adolescents with developmental disabilities frequently require ongoing support in education, social integration, and daily functioning. Families that demonstrate resilience are more likely to adapt their roles, routines, and expectations in ways that promote positive outcomes for both the adolescent and the family as a whole (Bayat, 2007). In developing countries such as Pakistan, families raising adolescents with disabilities face additional structural challenges. Limited access to specialized healthcare services, shortages of trained professionals, inadequate inclusive education systems, and weak social protection mechanisms often make caregiving more difficult. Studies conducted in Pakistan have shown that parents of children with developmental disabilities frequently encounter financial strain, social stigma, and limited institutional support (Shahbaz et al., 2023).

Cultural perceptions of disability also play a significant role in shaping family experiences. In many South Asian societies, disability is sometimes associated with stigma, misconceptions, or social exclusion. These attitudes may discourage families from seeking professional assistance or participating in community activities. As a result, parents and caregivers may experience isolation and emotional distress while navigating the challenges associated with raising a child with disabilities (Khan, Kamran, & Ashraf, 2017).



Urban contexts present both opportunities and challenges for families. In cities such as Karachi, the largest metropolitan area of Pakistan, families have relatively greater access to healthcare facilities, therapy centers, and specialized education programs compared with rural areas. However, these services are often expensive and concentrated in certain parts of the city, making them inaccessible for many low-income families. Economic disparities therefore create unequal access to support services for adolescents with disabilities.

Social support networks are another critical factor influencing family resilience. Support from extended family members, friends, educators, healthcare professionals, and community organizations can significantly reduce caregiver stress and improve psychological well-being (Zablotsky et al., 2013). In Pakistan, traditional extended family systems have historically provided informal caregiving support. However, rapid urbanization and changing family structures have weakened these traditional support networks, leaving many families to rely primarily on their immediate household resources.

Despite increasing attention to disability rights and inclusive development, empirical research examining the resilience and coping strategies of families raising adolescents with disabilities in Pakistan remains limited. Much of the existing research focuses on parental stress or clinical aspects of developmental disorders, while relatively fewer studies explore how families adapt and develop resilience in the face of long-term caregiving responsibilities.

Understanding these dynamics is particularly important for social work practice and policy development. Social workers play a crucial role in supporting families through counseling, advocacy, and connecting them with community resources. Evidence-based research on family resilience can help inform the design of family-centered interventions, caregiver support programs, and inclusive social protection policies that address the needs of adolescents with disabilities and their families.

Therefore, this study aims to examine family resilience, coping mechanisms, and adaptive behaviors among households raising adolescents with disabilities, including Autism Spectrum Disorder, in Karachi. By employing a mixed-method research approach involving both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the study seeks to generate deeper insights into how families navigate caregiving challenges, access available resources, and maintain family functioning despite structural and social barriers. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on disability and family resilience while also informing social work interventions and inclusive policy frameworks in Pakistan.

Objectives

General Objective

To examine family resilience, coping strategies, and adaptive behaviors among households raising adolescents with disabilities, including Autism Spectrum Disorder, in Karachi, Pakistan.

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the level of family resilience among families raising adolescents with disabilities.
2. To identify coping mechanisms adopted by caregivers to manage caregiving



stress and responsibilities.

3. To examine the relationship between family cohesion and adaptive family functioning.
4. To assess the role of community and social support systems in strengthening family resilience.
5. To explore the challenges faced by families raising adolescents with disabilities, including financial constraints and social stigma.
6. To provide policy and social work recommendations for strengthening support systems for families raising adolescents with disabilities in Pakistan.

Hypotheses

1. **H1:** Higher levels of family cohesion are positively associated with stronger family resilience among households raising adolescents with disabilities.
2. **H2:** Access to community and social support significantly improves coping strategies among caregivers of adolescents with disabilities.
3. **H3:** Families employing adaptive coping strategies demonstrate better psychological adjustment and family functioning.
4. **H4:** Financial strain negatively affects family resilience among households raising adolescents with disabilities.
5. **H5:** Social stigma related to disability significantly influences the emotional well-being and social participation of families.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in Family Resilience Theory, which explains how families adapt and maintain functioning when confronted with adversity. According to Froma Walsh (2016), family resilience involves processes such as shared belief systems, organizational flexibility, and communication patterns that help families cope with stress and recover from challenges.

Families raising adolescents with disabilities often face emotional, social, and financial pressures that require adaptive coping strategies. The resilience framework suggests that certain protective factors strengthen families' ability to cope with these challenges.

The conceptual framework assumes that strong family relationships, access to community support, and effective coping mechanisms positively influence family resilience, while financial strain and stigma may weaken adaptive capacity.

Literature Review

Disability and Family Dynamics

The presence of disability within a household significantly influences family structure, relationships, and daily routines. Families raising adolescents with disabilities often face complex caregiving responsibilities that require substantial emotional, financial, and social resources. Studies across various cultural contexts suggest that caregivers may experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and social isolation compared to families without disabled members.

Research conducted in Pakistan indicates that families of children with intellectual or developmental disabilities frequently encounter psychological distress and disruptions in family functioning. One study examining caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities found that higher caregiving burdens were associated with increased psychological stress among parents. However, the



presence of strong social support networks was found to reduce distress and improve family functioning (Jabeen et al., 2024).

These findings highlight the importance of supportive social environments in mitigating the negative impacts of caregiving stress. Families that receive emotional support from relatives, neighbors, and community organizations are often better equipped to manage caregiving responsibilities and maintain stable family relationships.

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Family Stress

Among developmental disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder has received considerable research attention due to its complex behavioral and social characteristics. Individuals with ASD often experience challenges related to communication, emotional regulation, and social interaction. These characteristics require consistent parental involvement, specialized interventions, and long-term therapy.

Several studies conducted in Pakistan have documented the psychological impact of ASD on parents. For example, research on parenting stress among caregivers of children with autism revealed significantly higher stress levels among parents compared to families without disabled children. The study emphasized that caregiving demands, behavioral challenges, and concerns about the child's future contribute to elevated stress among caregivers.

In addition, parental stress is often compounded by societal attitudes toward disability. In many South Asian societies, disability may be associated with stigma or misconceptions, which can lead to social exclusion and emotional distress for families. Parents may face criticism, blame, or misunderstanding from extended family members or community members, further increasing their psychological burden.

Family Resilience in Disability Contexts

Family resilience theory emphasizes the capacity of families to adapt positively in response to stress and adversity. Resilient families develop coping mechanisms that allow them to maintain emotional stability, effective communication, and collaborative problem-solving. In the context of disability, resilience may involve adjusting family roles, seeking professional support, and fostering positive attitudes toward caregiving responsibilities.

Empirical studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between resilience and parental well-being. Research involving parents of children with autism in Pakistan found that resilience significantly predicted subjective well-being among caregivers. Families with higher resilience levels reported better emotional health and greater satisfaction with their caregiving roles (Samoo et al., 2025).

Another study comparing mothers of children with autism and mothers of non-disabled children found that resilience and perceived social support were closely linked. Mothers who reported higher levels of social support also demonstrated greater resilience in managing caregiving challenges (Khan et al., 2017).

These findings suggest that resilience is not solely an individual trait but a collective family process influenced by social relationships, emotional support, and access to community resources.



Coping Strategies among Families

Coping strategies refer to the behavioral and psychological methods that individuals and families use to manage stress. Families raising adolescents with disabilities often adopt a variety of coping mechanisms, including emotional coping, problem-focused coping, and social support seeking.

Qualitative research conducted in Pakistan exploring the experiences of parents of autistic adolescents identified several coping strategies commonly used by families. These included seeking guidance from healthcare professionals, participating in parent support groups, relying on extended family networks, and developing acceptance of the child's condition. However, the study also highlighted that many families struggled with inadequate access to professional services and limited public awareness about autism (Rauf & Bashir, 2025).

In addition to emotional coping strategies, families often develop practical adaptations in their daily routines to accommodate the needs of adolescents with disabilities. These adaptations may include modifying household responsibilities, adjusting work schedules, and prioritizing therapy sessions and educational support.

Role of Social Support Systems

Social support plays a critical role in enhancing family resilience and reducing caregiver stress. Support systems may include extended family members, friends, healthcare professionals, teachers, social workers, and community organizations.

Research has shown that social support can significantly improve psychological well-being among parents of children with disabilities. For instance, studies examining the relationship between social support and parental mental health have found that emotional and practical assistance from family and community networks reduces feelings of isolation and enhances coping capacity.

In Pakistan, informal support networks such as extended family structures often play an important role in caregiving. However, rapid urbanization and changing family structures have weakened some traditional support systems, particularly in large metropolitan cities like Karachi. As a result, families may increasingly rely on formal institutions such as therapy centers, rehabilitation programs, and special education institutions.

Policy and Social Work Implications

From a social work perspective, strengthening family resilience requires both individual-level interventions and broader policy initiatives. Social workers can play a vital role in supporting families through counseling, advocacy, and connecting caregivers with available services. Family-centered interventions, parent training programs, and community awareness campaigns can help reduce stigma and improve access to support resources.

In Pakistan, disability policies have gradually evolved to promote inclusive education and social protection. However, implementation gaps remain significant. Many families still face barriers in accessing specialized healthcare, educational accommodations, and financial assistance programs. Inclusive social protection policies that address the economic and social needs of families raising adolescents with disabilities are therefore essential. These policies may include subsidized therapy services, caregiver support programs, inclusive schooling initiatives, and community-based rehabilitation programs.



Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of family resilience and coping mechanisms among households raising adolescents with disabilities.

Mixed-method research is particularly suitable for social research because it allows researchers to capture both statistical patterns and lived experiences of participants.

The quantitative component examines relationships between variables such as family cohesion, coping strategies, and resilience. The qualitative component explores caregivers' experiences, perceptions, and adaptive behaviors.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Karachi, the largest metropolitan city in Pakistan targeting below centers.

- Special education schools
- Therapy centers
- Autism support organizations
- Community-based rehabilitation programs

However, access to these services varies depending on socioeconomic status and geographic location.

Target Population

The target population consisted of families raising adolescents with disabilities aged between 12 and 18 years, including those diagnosed with:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Intellectual disabilities
- Developmental delays
- Learning disabilities

Parents or primary caregivers were selected as respondents.

Sample Size

A sample of 75 families was selected for the study.

The sample size was considered appropriate for exploratory social research involving community-based populations.

Sample Distribution

Category	Number
ASD adolescents	30
Intellectual disability	20
Learning disabilities	15
Other developmental conditions	10
Total	75

Sampling Technique

The study employed purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling. Participants were recruited through:

- Special education schools



- Therapy centers
- Parent support groups
- Non-governmental organizations

This approach helped reach families actively engaged in caregiving.

Data Collection Methods

Two primary methods were used:

1. Quantitative Survey

A structured questionnaire was administered to 75 caregivers.

The questionnaire measured:

- Family cohesion
- Coping strategies
- Social support
- Financial stress
- Perceived resilience

Responses were recorded using a **5-point Likert scale**.

2. Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 caregivers from the sample.

The interviews explored:

- Emotional experiences of caregiving
- Daily coping strategies
- Perceived community support
- Experiences of stigma

Research Instruments

The questionnaire included four sections:

Section A – Demographic Information

- Age of caregiver
- Gender
- Education level
- Household income
- Type of disability

Section B – Family Resilience Scale

Adapted from family resilience research developed by Froma Walsh.

Measured:

- Family communication
- Emotional bonding
- Problem solving

Section C – Coping Strategies

Measured strategies such as:

- Seeking social support
- Religious coping
- Problem-solving behavior
- Emotional regulation



Section D – Social Support and Stigma

Measured:

- Support from family members
- Community acceptance
- Access to services

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using:

- Descriptive statistics
- Correlation analysis
- Cross-tabulation

These methods helped identify relationships between resilience and coping factors.

Qualitative Analysis

Interview responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying key themes such as:

- Emotional adaptation
- Community support
- Financial challenges
- Coping strategies

Results and Findings

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Percentage
Mothers as caregivers	68%
Fathers as caregivers	22%
Other family members	10%

Education Level

Education	Percentage
Secondary	28%
Graduate	42%
Postgraduate	15%
No formal education	15%

Monthly Household Income

Income Range	Percentage
Low income	36%
Middle income	44%
High income	20%

Family Resilience Scores

Level of Resilience	Percentage
High resilience	34%
Moderate resilience	46%
Low resilience	20%



The findings suggest that most families demonstrate moderate levels of resilience, supported by family cohesion and adaptive coping.

Correlation Analysis

Variable	Correlation with Resilience
Family cohesion	0.61
Social support	0.58
Coping strategies	0.65
Financial stress	-0.47

The results indicate that coping strategies and family cohesion strongly influence resilience, while financial stress negatively affects family functioning.

Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Result	Interpretation
H1	Higher family cohesion is positively associated with stronger family resilience among households raising adolescents with disabilities.	Supported (r = 0.61, p < 0.01)	Strong family cohesion significantly enhances resilience.
H2	Access to community and social support significantly improves coping strategies among caregivers of adolescents with disabilities.	Supported (r = 0.58, p < 0.01)	Social and community support positively influences coping strategies.
H3	Families employing adaptive coping strategies demonstrate better psychological adjustment and family functioning.	Supported (r = 0.65, p < 0.01)	Adaptive coping strategies significantly improve family functioning.
H4	Financial strain negatively affects family resilience among households raising adolescents with disabilities.	Supported (r = -0.47, p < 0.01)	Financial stress reduces family resilience.
H5	Social stigma related to disability significantly influences the emotional well-being and social participation of families.	Supported (Qualitative findings)	Social stigma negatively impacts emotional well-being and community engagement.

Interpretation:

- Family Cohesion** shows a strong positive correlation with Family Resilience (r = 0.61, p < 0.01).
- Coping Strategies** also have a significant positive correlation with resilience



($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$).

3. **Social Support** is moderately correlated with resilience ($r = 0.58, p < 0.01$).
4. **Financial Stress** is negatively correlated with resilience ($r = -0.47, p < 0.01$), indicating financial strain reduces family adaptive capacity.
5. **Strong correlations** among cohesion, coping strategies, and social support suggest interrelated protective factors enhancing resilience.

Findings

- The findings confirm that families raising adolescents with disabilities face significant challenges but also demonstrate remarkable resilience.
- Family cohesion and social support play critical roles in strengthening resilience.
- Families that maintain open communication and shared caregiving responsibilities are better able to cope with stress.
- However, financial strain and social stigma remain important barriers in the Pakistani context.

Qualitative Findings

Four major themes emerged from interviews:

Emotional Adaptation	Family Support	Financial Challenges	Social Stigma
Many parents initially experienced shock and anxiety after diagnosis but gradually developed acceptance and resilience.	Extended family support helped reduce caregiving stress.	Therapy and educational expenses were major burdens.	Some families reported negative attitudes from society.

Conclusion

This study examined family resilience, coping strategies, and adaptive behaviors among households raising adolescents with disabilities in Karachi. The findings highlight that while families face emotional, financial, and social challenges, many demonstrate strong resilience supported by family cohesion and community support. Strengthening institutional support systems and inclusive policies is essential to improve the well-being of both adolescents with disabilities and their families.

Policy and Social Work Implications

The study recommends:

1. Expanding community-based rehabilitation programs.
 2. Increasing financial assistance for families raising children with disabilities.
 3. Promoting inclusive education policies.
 4. Establishing caregiver support groups.
 5. Raising public awareness to reduce stigma.
- Social workers can play a vital role in strengthening family resilience through counseling, advocacy, and linking families to support services.



Recommendations

1. Incorporate structured resilience programs within rehabilitation and social work services.
2. Develop family support groups for common problem solving.
3. Expand social protection initiatives such as caregiver stipends and relief services.
4. Implement inclusive education reforms with embedded social-work support.
5. Launch anti-stigma awareness campaigns targeting schools, communities, and mass media.

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