

Social Support, Resilience and Wellbeing Among Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Review

Dr. Kirti Madnani^{1*}, Dr. Surabhi Srivastava², Mantasha Ali³

ABSTRACT

Mothers caring for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience significant emotional, social, and psychological challenges. Social support and resilience have emerged as important factors influencing their wellbeing and ability to cope with caregiving demands. This review synthesizes existing literature from 2000 to 2025 to explore the role of social support, resilience and wellbeing in caregiving of mothers of children with ASD. Numerous peer-reviewed studies focusing on social support, resilience, and maternal wellbeing were selected for review. The literature consistently shows that greater social support and higher resilience are linked to reduced stress, improved mental health, and enhanced quality of life for mothers. Numerous international studies have highlighted the critical role of social support and resilience in reducing caregiver stress and improving psychological outcomes. While international studies provide robust evidence of these associations, research in India is limited. Available studies suggest that Indian mothers face additional challenges such as societal stigma, cultural expectations, and inadequate formal support systems, which influence their caregiving experience. It also reveals a critical need for more research focused on the Indian context to develop culturally sensitive interventions and policies that address the unique challenges faced by these mothers.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder, mothers, social support, resilience, wellbeing*

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by ongoing challenges in social communication and interaction, in addition to restricted and repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. According to the **American Psychiatric Association (2013)**, these symptoms must be present in the early developmental period and cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning. The global prevalence of ASD has been increasing, with estimates suggesting approximately 1 in 54 children in the United States are diagnosed with the disorder (**Maenner et al., 2020**). In India, prevalence estimates vary due to regional differences in awareness and diagnostic resources. A systematic review and meta-analysis reported a pooled prevalence of 0.09% in urban areas and 0.11% in rural settings (**Raina et al., 2018**). However, national data from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021 suggest a

¹Assistant Professor & Project Incharge Dept of Psychology, Rajkeeya Mahavidyalaya Gosaikheda Unnao affiliated to Chhatrapai Sahuji Maharaj University Kanpur.

²Assistant Professor (Co- PI) Dept of Psychology, VRAL Rajkeeya Mahila Mahavidyalaya

³Project Fellow, Dept. of Psychology, Rajkeeya Mahavidyalaya Gosaikheda Unnao.

*Corresponding Author

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higher prevalence of approximately 0.71% (1 in 140 individuals) (GBD 2021 Disease and Injury Incidence and Prevalence Collaborators, 2022).

The diagnosis of a child with ASD significantly alters family dynamics, with mothers often assuming the primary caregiving role. This responsibility can lead to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as mothers navigate the challenges associated with their child's condition (Benson & Karlof, 2009). Additionally, societal stigma and cultural expectations may exacerbate these challenges, particularly in collectivist societies like India, where family reputation and social conformity are highly valued (Kalyanpur & Gowramma, 2007).

Parenting a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can be challenging due to the child's cognitive limitations and behavioral issues, which may disrupt family dynamics and induce stress (Khawar & Saeed, 2016). Research indicates that mothers often assume the primary caregiving role, leading to increased mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety (Lin, 2015; Lin, 2011; Lovell, Moss, & Wetherell, 2015). These mothers frequently face difficulties like financial strain, reduced employment opportunities, and limited participation in social activities (Beecham & Romeo, 2007). These challenges of rearing a child with ASD drive the loop of helplessness and hopelessness jeopardising the wellbeing of whole family. In this context personal strengths like resilience and social resources like perceived social support can act as a buffer and facilitate mental wellbeing and overall family dynamics.

Parental stress and burnout among caregivers of children with ASD have been well-documented globally, with Indian research reflecting similar trends. For instance, Guleria & Kumar (2020) found heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among Indian mothers, despite their use of positive coping mechanisms. In North East India, Baruah & Deka (2022) revealed consistent stress and professional–personal conflicts, although families showed resilience. These local findings align with larger international patterns: a multi-centre study of 683 parent dyads demonstrated that greater ASD symptom severity significantly predicted parental psychological distress, with mothers typically exhibiting elevated distress (Crowell et al., 2022).

Understanding Resilience

Resilience, defined by the American Psychological Association (2014) as "the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands." The concept of "bouncing back" refers to the ability to recover from adversity and return to a baseline state of functioning. This adaptive capacity allows individuals to navigate challenges and emerge stronger. The phenomenon of "bouncing back" in resilience involves several key components:

- **Emotional Regulation:** Managing emotions effectively under stress.
- **Self-Efficacy:** Belief in one's ability to influence events and solve problems.
- **Adaptability:** Being flexible and open to change.
- **Support Systems:** Building strong relationships and having a network of supportive individuals.
- **Optimism:** Maintaining a positive outlook and focusing on opportunities for growth.

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These components contribute to an individual's ability to navigate challenges and recover from setbacks.

Resilience is another critical factor influencing maternal well-being. In mothers of children with ASD, resilience enables them to manage caregiving challenges more effectively, leading to better psychological well-being.

Several theoretical frameworks help explain how resilience develops in parents of children with ASD.

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) proposes that resilience is influenced by multiple environmental layers, including family, community, and broader societal factors. Research by **Zaidman-Zait et al. (2023)** indicates that aspects such as family quality of life, sense of community, and access to support services play a significant role in fostering family resilience.

The Family Resilience Framework (Walsh, 2003, 2006) focuses on how families utilize internal strengths and social resources to adapt effectively to challenges. Walsh identifies three core processes that support resilience:

- (1) Belief Systems, which involve finding meaning in adversity and sustaining hope;
- (2) Organizational Patterns, which include flexibility, connectedness, and resource access; and
- (3) Communication and Problem-Solving, which emphasizes clarity, open emotional expression, and collaborative decision-making.

In the context of mothers of children with ASD, this framework suggests that combining personal strengths—such as optimism and adaptive coping—with support from family, friends, and professionals enhances both functional and psychological outcomes.

The Stress and Coping Perspective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) further highlights that resilience interacts with social support to buffer the effects of stress. This interaction enables mothers to reframe challenges, employ effective coping strategies, and maintain psychological well-being.

Overall, resilience in mothers is influenced by both personal attributes, including optimism and self-efficacy, and external resources, such as social support and access to information (**Ekas & Rafferty, 2019**). Evidence suggests that mothers who exhibit higher resilience are better able to manage caregiving demands and are less likely to experience burnout (**Kotera et al., 2020**). Interventions that aim to strengthen resilience have also been associated with improvements in psychological capital and life satisfaction among mothers of children with ASD (**Alharthi et al., 2023**).

Cultural norms and societal expectations also play a significant role in shaping resilience. For instance, a study in China highlighted that parents' resilience was influenced by their interactions within various social systems, including self-reflection, acceptance of their child's condition, and the expansion of their social networks (**Xu et al., 2020**). Such cultural perspectives underscore the importance of considering contextual factors when assessing and fostering resilience in parents of children with ASD.

Understanding Social Support

In this context, social support emerges as a crucial factor influencing maternal well-being. Social support is the comfort, help and care that individuals receive from their social network, such as friends, family, colleagues, or community. It includes the emotional, instrumental, and informational resources provided by others with the aim of enhancing an individual's overall well-being and reducing stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). For mothers of children with ASD, social support serves as a critical buffer against the stresses of caregiving.

Theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which social support influences maternal well-being. The Stress and Coping Theory, proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), suggests that social support helps individuals appraise and cope with stressors more effectively, thereby mitigating their negative impact on health. In the context of mothers of children with ASD, supportive relationships can enhance adaptive coping strategies, reducing the adverse effects of caregiving stress. Additionally, the Family Stress Model (Conger & Conger, 2002) emphasizes the role of economic pressures and interpersonal relationships in family functioning. Research has shown that social support can moderate the effects of financial strain and marital conflict on maternal mental health, underscoring its importance in buffering stress (Conger & Conger, 2002).

Recent studies have further highlighted the relationship between social support and maternal well-being. A study by Bi et al. (2022) found that perceived social support and the effectiveness of social support networks significantly influenced the subjective well-being of mothers of children with ASD in Shanghai. The study highlighted the importance of both the size and intimacy of social support networks. Research by Rezaq et al. (2025) in Saudi Arabia indicated a significant positive correlation between social support and quality of life among mothers of children with ASD. The study emphasized the need for targeted interventions to support mothers, particularly those with multiple children with ASD. A meta-analytic study by Yu et al. (2019) reviewed 41 studies and found that caregiver-focused interventions, such as mindfulness-based interventions and cognitive behavioral therapy, effectively reduced stress and improved psychological well-being in parents of children with ASD.

Studies have shown that mothers who perceive higher levels of social support report lower levels of anxiety and depression (Ekas & Rafferty, 2019). Moreover, social support has been linked to improved coping strategies and better overall mental health outcomes (Thoits, 2011). In the Indian context, however, societal stigma and cultural expectations often hinder the development of supportive networks, making it essential to explore culturally sensitive approaches to enhancing social support for these mothers.

Present Study

Social support and resilience have emerged as important factors influencing their wellbeing and ability to cope with caregiving demands. This review synthesizes existing literature by analysing peer reviewed publications from 2000 to 2025 to It also identifies gaps in research within the Indian context. In the present review the main aim is to understand social support, resilience and wellbeing among mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and answer the following question-

- In what ways do social support and resilience interact to mitigate stress and enhance the well-being of mothers of children with ASD?

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Rationale

While previous studies have separately shown the benefits of social support and resilience for mothers of children with ASD, very few have examined how these two elements work together, especially in diverse cultural settings like India. This literature review addresses that gap by examining all published researches from 2000 to 2025 that explores both social support and resilience. It aims to reveal how these factors interact to reduce stress and improve overall well-being in mothers caring for children with ASD. By synthesizing these findings, the review offers a foundation for developing more effective, culturally aware support strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic review synthesizes peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2025, focusing on the impact of social support and resilience on the wellbeing of mothers raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Inclusion criteria encompassed studies that specifically addressed maternal experiences related to social support, resilience, or overall wellbeing in the context of ASD caregiving. Exclusion criteria involved research not published in English and studies focusing on caregivers other than mothers.

A comprehensive search was conducted across electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Researchgate, and SpringerLink, using relevant keywords. The selection process involved screening titles and abstracts for relevance, followed by full-text reviews to ensure adherence to inclusion criteria. Data were extracted regarding study characteristics, participant demographics, and key findings related to social support, resilience, and maternal wellbeing. Findings were organized into narrative summaries to identify common patterns and insights across studies, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing maternal wellbeing in the context of ASD caregiving.

DISCUSSION

This systematic review consolidates evidence from various studies examining the impact of social support and resilience on the wellbeing of mothers raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The findings consistently underscore the significance of these factors in enhancing maternal mental health and coping abilities. A thematic analysis of the selected literature revealed three prominent and interconnected themes:

- (1) The Role of Social Support,**
- (2) Resilience as a Protective Factor among Mothers of Children with ASD**
- (3) Relationship between Resilience and Social Support**

(1) The Role of Social Support-

Perceived social support is a critical factor in alleviating the psychological challenges faced by mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Studies consistently demonstrate that robust social support networks are associated with lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among these mothers. For instance, research by **Siman-Tov and Kaniel (2011)** found that social support significantly reduced parents' stress. Similarly, **Smith et al. (2014)** observed that larger and positively supporting social networks predicted maternal well-being after 18 months. Additionally, informal support from family and friends has been linked to better emotional coping and lower levels of anxiety and depression (**Ekas et al., 2016**).

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Recent research highlights the critical role of social support and resilience in enhancing maternal well-being among mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). **Wang et al. (2025)** conducted a cross-lagged panel study in China, demonstrating that ongoing social support predicts subsequent resilience and well-being outcomes over time, emphasizing the importance of sustained supportive relationships. Similarly, **Choudhury and Chandel (2022)** in India employed mixed methods to examine the husband's role in caregiving, finding that spousal support significantly reduces maternal stress and improves coping, thereby advocating for family-based intervention programs. The structure and quality of social networks were further explored by **Bi et al. (2022)** in China, who underscored that both quantitative and qualitative aspects of support networks directly influence maternal well-being.

From South Asia, **Sarwar et al. (2022)** conducted a study in Pakistan which showed that social support enhances psychological capital and overall well-being, suggesting that combining social support with psychological training could be beneficial. Research from Saudi Arabia by **Al-Kandari et al. (2021)** highlighted how emotional and instrumental support contribute to increased resilience and post-traumatic growth among mothers of children with ASD. In Egypt, **Arnous and Yeo (2020)** found that perceived social support mediates the relationship between resilience and self-esteem, reinforcing the importance of supportive networks for psychological health.

Studies from India by **Das et al. (2017)** linked higher perceived social support to better resilience and lower stress levels, advocating for community-based support programs. **Smith et al. (2013)** in the USA provided longitudinal evidence that strong social networks improve emotional well-being in families affected by ASD, recommending efforts to foster long-term social connections. Earlier work by **Ekas et al. (2008)** in the USA emphasized religiosity and spirituality as culturally tailored support systems that bolster maternal resilience and coping.

(2) Resilience as a Protective Factor among Mothers of Children with ASD

Resilience itself is increasingly recognized as a protective and mediating factor in maternal well-being. **Pastor-Cerezuola et al. (2016)** demonstrated its buffering effects against the psychological strains associated with ASD caregiving. **Santoso et al. (2015)** and **Kanwal & Asad (2018)** further illustrated how resilience enables mothers to effectively navigate daily caregiving challenges, enhancing emotional strength and well-being. **Kotera et al. (2020)** highlighted that families with higher resilience demonstrate better coping capabilities, advocating for resilience-building interventions.

Recent investigations also support these findings. **Wang et al. (2025)** showed that resilience predicts well-being over time, emphasizing the need for sustained resilience-focused interventions. In India, **Regy et al. (2024)** employed a mixed-methods design to reveal personal growth and increased emotional strength as outcomes of resilience, while **Shimil & P.V. (2024)** found higher resilience among mothers with greater social support, reinforcing the strong link between social support and inner strength. **Al-Kandari et al. (2021)** confirmed that resilience predicts post-traumatic growth in mothers of children with ASD, suggesting that support groups play a vital role in resilience enhancement.

Arnous & Yeo (2020) underscored social support's mediating effect on resilience and self-esteem, further indicating that supportive environments indirectly strengthen resilience.

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Kanwal et al. (2018) connected high resilience with hope and better mental health, positioning psychological resilience as key to optimism and adjustment. **Das et al. (2017)** advocated for resilience-building strategies to improve stress coping in families, while **Lai et al. (2015)** identified emotion-focused coping as a mechanism that strengthens resilience. Finally, Santoso et al. (2015) emphasized that daily adaptive routines are instrumental in maintaining emotional strength and resilience among mothers.

Together, these studies suggest that fostering both social support and resilience through culturally sensitive and contextually relevant interventions is essential for improving maternal well-being in families of children with ASD. This comprehensive understanding informs future directions for supportive programs that not only mitigate stress but also promote growth and adaptive coping in this population.

(3) Psychological Wellbeing Outcomes in Mothers of Children with ASD

The review of literature highlights the significant role of social support and resilience in enhancing the psychological wellbeing of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the interplay between social support, resilience, and psychological well-being among parents—especially mothers—of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A longitudinal study by **Wang et al. (2025)** in China utilized cross-lagged mediation analysis to explore the dynamic relationship between social support, resilience, and well-being. Their findings revealed that social support not only enhanced immediate psychological outcomes but also predicted long-term improvements in resilience, which in turn positively influenced well-being. These results suggest that sustained, structured interventions targeting both support systems and resilience-building are crucial for improving maternal mental health.

In the Indian context, **Shimil & P.V. (2024)** conducted a comparative quantitative study among mothers of children with disabilities. Their results demonstrated a strong correlation between higher levels of perceived social support and greater psychological well-being. This reinforces the central role of community and familial networks in buffering maternal stress and highlights the need for culturally sensitive support mechanisms. Similarly, **Choudhury & Chandel (2022)** explored spousal support using a quantitative survey design. Their study concluded that husbands' involvement and emotional backing significantly improved mothers' psychological well-being, underlining the importance of integrating family-based support modules in intervention planning.

From a regional perspective in India, **Das et al. (2017)** conducted a cross-sectional study in the North East to assess the influence of stress, coping mechanisms, and social support on family well-being. The findings emphasized that both resilience and social support were positively associated with better mental health outcomes. The study strongly advocated for community-level interventions that enhance coping resources and access to social support networks.

International studies offer further validation. **Ekas et al. (2008)** in the United States examined the roles of religiosity and spirituality in maternal well-being through a quantitative survey. Their research demonstrated that participation in religious and spiritual communities contributed to enhanced socioemotional well-being, suggesting that interventions should consider culturally appropriate and spiritually inclusive frameworks to strengthen emotional resilience. In Pakistan, **Kanwal et al. (2018)** explored psychological

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factors such as resilience, hope, and self-efficacy through a correlational study. Their results indicated that high resilience and optimism were linked to improved psychological outcomes, establishing the importance of psychological skill-building as part of comprehensive support for mothers of ASD children.

Santoso et al. (2015), in a qualitative study conducted in Indonesia, investigated how daily activities influenced well-being in mothers of children with ASD. The research revealed that engaging in meaningful and structured daily occupations bolstered emotional health, thus advocating for the incorporation of occupational therapy in mental health interventions. **Smith et al. (2013)** offered a broader perspective through a literature review conducted in the U.S., concluding that a stable and supportive family environment is a fundamental determinant of maternal well-being. Their synthesis of findings called for holistic, family-oriented strategies to enhance emotional resilience.

Finally, in Singapore, **Lai et al. (2015)** employed a mixed-methods approach to study how coping strategies affect emotional well-being in parents of children with ASD. Their results showed that adaptive coping mechanisms, particularly emotion-focused strategies, significantly improved psychological outcomes. These findings suggest the need for intervention programs that explicitly teach and reinforce effective coping techniques.

Collectively, these studies underscore the critical role of both individual psychological resources and external support systems in promoting maternal well-being. Tailored interventions that incorporate family involvement, community support, spirituality, and adaptive coping skills appear most effective in addressing the unique challenges faced by mothers of children with ASD. This integrated evidence base provides a strong foundation for future program development and policy recommendations. For mothers of children with ASD—whose caregiving experiences are emotionally demanding and often socially isolating—the integration of supportive networks with resilience-building strategies appears essential for enhancing overall wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

This review synthesizes two decades of research (2000–2025) and highlights the critical roles of social support and resilience in enhancing the wellbeing of mothers raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Across cultural contexts, strong empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that social support reduces stress, increases emotional coping, and promotes better psychological outcomes. Across studies, emotional and practical help from family, spouses, and community was consistently linked to lower stress and better mental health. For example, **Wang et al. (2025)** found that ongoing support helps build resilience, which in turn boosts long-term well-being.

Similarly, resilience acts as an internal protective factor that enables mothers to adapt to caregiving challenges and maintain emotional stability.

The interaction between social support and resilience is particularly significant. Social support strengthens resilience over time, and resilient mothers are better able to perceive, seek, and utilize support effectively. Together, these resources foster improved wellbeing, reduced caregiver burden, and greater long-term adjustment.

While international research on these constructs is extensive, Indian studies remain limited. The available literature indicates that Indian mothers face unique challenges—such as

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stigma, gendered caregiving expectations, and inadequate formal support systems—that influence their wellbeing. These cultural nuances underscore the importance of context-specific research and interventions tailored to the Indian scenario.

Implications

These findings point to important actions:

- 1. Support Programs:** Services should pair social support (like peer groups or family counseling) with resilience training (such as mindfulness or problem-solving skills). Keeping these programs available over time is likely to have the best results.
- 2. Family and Community Involvement:** Since support from partners and the wider community helps mothers cope (Choudhury & Chandel, 2022), programs should include husbands and other family members. It's also important to address social stigma and cultural expectations that might block supportive relationships.
- 3. Policy and Services:** Health systems should offer ongoing support tailored for parents—this could include parent education, mental health counseling, and short breaks from caregiving. Professionals in healthcare and social services need training to recognize caregiver stress and connect them with the right resources.
- 4. Integrating Resilience Training into Interventions:** Techniques such as mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and positive parenting training can help mothers build internal coping resources.
- 5. Future Research:** Future studies should follow families over time, across different cultures, to find out which support and resilience strategies work best. Researchers should also test how well these programs can be scaled up to help more families.

By combining strong support systems with tools that help mothers build resilience, we can make a real difference—not only in the lives of mothers but also in the well-being of their children with ASD.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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