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Fathers' Lived Experiences in Parenting Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore fathers' experiences, meanings, and emotional dynamics regarding their role in supporting the development of children with ASD. This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore fathers' experiences in the early childhood care of children with ASD. The study was conducted at the Pembina State Special School in Yogyakarta and the Srawung Bocah Inclusive Early Childhood Education Center. Data were collected through in-depth interviews lasting approximately 30–40 minutes with two fathers who have children diagnosed with ASD, and were subsequently analyzed using Braun & Clark's thematic analysis. The results indicate that fathers' understanding of their role in caring for children with ASD evolves through a process of acceptance, emotional reflection, and role negotiation between economic responsibilities and caregiving duties. Fathers' involvement is manifested through adaptive parenting practices, emotional engagement, and collaboration with mothers in supporting their children's development. Additionally, spirituality, social support, and family dynamics are key factors shaping fathers' resilience in fulfilling their parenting roles for children with ASD.

Keywords*: autism spectrum disorder, child rearing, early childhood, the role of fathers,*

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Introduction

Children with developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) often face challenges in achieving developmental milestones optimally. Autism is a neurobiological developmental disorder that emerges in early childhood, affecting language, cognitive, social, and behavioral abilities (Kalalo & Yuniar, 2019). This condition makes it difficult for children with ASD to perform daily activities independently, leading to a higher level of dependence on adults. In line with Biruny (2022) research, children with ASD often cannot yet meet basic needs such as bathing, eating, and dressing without assistance from others. This situation requires intensive support and guidance from the adults around them, particularly their parents, so that the child can gradually develop these basic skills.

The need for support in raising children with special needs is not only an individual matter but is also reflected in the global trend of an increasing number of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). According to data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States, in 2018, an estimated 1 in 59 children had ASD. Research by Issac et al. (2025) also noted a global prevalence of ASD of 0.77%, with the highest proportion among boys at 1.14%. In Indonesia, data on the number of individuals with ASD remains limited; however, the Ministry of Health (2013) estimated that there are more than 112,000 children with ASD in the 5–19 age range. Overall, the number of individuals with ASD in Indonesia is estimated to reach approximately 2.4 million, with an annual increase of around 500,000 children (KemenPPPA, 2018).

This increase in prevalence indicates increasingly complex caregiving challenges for families. This situation requires parents to be emotionally, financially, and socially prepared to face a long-term and ongoing caregiving process (Liao & Li, 2019; Yesilkaya & Magallón-Neri, 2024). In this regard, parents, as primary

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caregivers, occupy a strategic position because their support, involvement, and responsiveness directly influence the quality of the child's development. Therefore, raising a child with ASD requires the family's full involvement, particularly both parents as the child's primary environment.

To support optimal child development, parents play a role in providing love, protection, education, and other basic needs (Az Zahra et al., 2024). According to Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development, a child's growth and development are influenced by direct interactions with their environment, particularly the microsystem comprising the family—formed not only with the mother but also with the father (Santrock, 2007). Kulik & Sadeh (2015) add that a father's involvement in parenting is influenced by various ecological systems, ranging from the father's childhood experiences, the child's characteristics, the dynamics of the relationship with the mother (maternal gatekeeping), and the type of community where the family resides. This underscores that a father's role cannot be separated from a complex ecological context.

To deepen our understanding of father involvement, this study also draws on the generative fathering framework (Dollahite & Hawkins, 1998). This framework emphasizes: (1) fathers are responsible for meeting their children's needs through various forms of fatherwork, such as caregiving, recreation, spiritual guidance, and moral guidance; (2) the father-child relationship yields mutual benefits, where the child receives support while the father also experiences personal growth; and (3) a father's strengths can actually develop amidst parenting challenges, including when supporting a child with special needs (Mitchell & Lashewicz, 2016). Other findings also indicate that when a child's physical and psychological needs are met, a father's presence and involvement have been shown to positively influence the child's social and emotional development (Zhong, 2023). In the context of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the patterns of interaction between fathers and children exhibit distinctive social, cognitive, and affective modalities that have the potential to support more effective interventions (Perzolli et al., 2021). Therefore, consistent, warm, and responsible father involvement not only strengthens parental functioning but also contributes to the formation of a healthy attachment between father and child..

Having a child with special needs often brings significant challenges and changes to a family. However, there are also fathers who find positive meaning in their role as caregivers to children with ASD. Some fathers view the presence of a child with ASD as a special blessing, which serves as a source of strength for their spiritual values and faitha (Febrianto & Darmawanti, 2016). In the study by Rudelli et al. (2021), It was found that fathers who have a positive perception of their fatherly role demonstrate higher levels of parenting satisfaction and feel more confident and fulfilled in their daily lives. Therefore, fathers' involvement in parenting is not always synonymous with a burden; rather, it can also serve as an opportunity for reflection, emotional closeness, and the development of a stronger sense of identity as a parent. This positive interpretation also encourages fathers to be more actively involved in parenting.

Other research indicates that fathers' involvement in the care of children with special needs is manifested through a division of roles with the mother, encompassing both caregiving responsibilities and the provision of financial support (Uribe-Morales et al., 2021). This involvement is not limited to meeting the family's financial needs but also includes direct participation in daily caregiving. Such involvement includes physical care, learning support, providing social-emotional learning, taking the child to therapy, and seeking information regarding educational and health services (Amelia et al., 2018; Tukan et al., 2024). Perzolli et al. (2021) also found that fathers' involvement with children with ASD tends to manifest through play and motor activities..

In line with this, interventions for children with ASD also emphasize parental involvement through a parent coaching approach, such as the consistent application of responsive communication strategies and the management of maladaptive behaviors at home (Flippin et al., 2021; Malucelli et al., 2021). PProviding interventions to children with ASD will have an impact on improving cognitive abilities, adaptive skills, communication, and behavior (Novianti et al., 2022; Pellecchia et al., 2020). Nevertheless, fathers' involvement in the intervention process tends to be lower than that of mothers due to time constraints, a lack of suitable programs, and gender role constructs (Donohue & Tynan, 2025; Rankin et al., 2019)**.** Kondisi ini berpotensi membuat intervensi kurang optimal dan berdampak pada perkembangan anak.

In the Indonesian context, parenting roles are still predominantly dominated by mothers, while fathers are more often positioned as breadwinners (Asfari, 2022). Other research reveals that factors such as traditional masculinity, lack of knowledge, and low self-confidence also influence fathers' involvement in parenting (Istiqomah et al., 2026). This is reinforced by initial observations and interviews with educators at the Yogyakarta State Special Education School (SLB Negeri Pembina) and the Srawung Bocah Inclusive Early Childhood Education Center (PAUD Inklusi), which indicate that fathers' involvement in educational activities for children with ASD remains limited. Educators noted that communication regarding children's development

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is more frequently handled by mothers, while fathers tend to play a role in administrative matters and school drop-offs.

In recent years, research on parenting children with ASD has shown an increased focus on the role of fathers, ranging from types of interventions and patterns of involvement in daily activities to the strategies used to support children's development. However, these findings do not yet provide a comprehensive picture of fathers' involvement, particularly in terms of their in-depth experiences. Studies that specifically explore the subjective meanings, personal experiences, and emotional dynamics of fathers raising children with ASD remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the meaning of fathers' involvement, identify forms of involvement in daily caregiving, and describe the emotional dynamics of fathers in supporting the development of children with ASD. The following are the research questions in this study:

1. How do fathers perceive their role and involvement in supporting the development of young children with ASD?
2. What forms does fathers' involvement in the care of young children with ASD take in daily life?

This study is expected to encourage the creation of a more inclusive, equitable, and collaborative family environment in raising children with special needs, particularly young children with ASD. Additionally, this study provides insights for fathers regarding the importance of their role and involvement in child-rearing, both in terms of personal significance and daily parenting practices, thereby strengthening support for the child's overall development.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design. The phenomenological approach is used to explore fathers' experiences in raising young children with ASD. Phenomenology is a research approach that aims to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it through the perspectives of those who have experienced it (Teherani et al., 2015).

Subject selection was conducted using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) fathers of children diagnosed with ASD aged 3 to 8 years; (2) fathers living in the same household as their child with ASD; (3) fathers living with their partner (the child's mother) and involved in shared parenting. The participant selection process was conducted in stages, beginning with the researcher gaining access to the field through the Yogyakarta State Special Education School (SLB) Negeri Pembina Yogyakarta and the Srawung Bocah Inclusive Early Childhood Education. After obtaining permission, the researcher identified potential participants with the assistance of teachers who work with children with ASD according to the study criteria. Subsequently, the researcher contacted potential participants directly to explain the study's objectives, procedures, and to obtain informed consent. Of the fathers who met the initial criteria, the majority were unwilling to be interviewed due to time constraints and a lack of readiness for in-depth interviews. Therefore, this study involved only two fathers aged 30–45 who voluntarily agreed to provide in-depth information in accordance with the study's objectives.

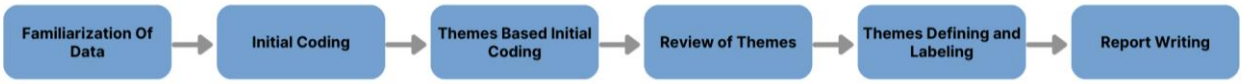
Table 1. Demographic information on fathers and characteristics of children with ASD

Father's Initial	Mr. Y	Mr. F
Father Age	45 years	32 years
Marital Status	Married	Married
Education Level	SMP	S1
Employment Status	Work	Work
Residance	Yogyakarta	Yogyakarta
Residance Status	Living with Child	Living with child
Child Age	8 years	6 years
Child Gender	Girl	Girls
Diagnosis	Autism	Autism

DOI: 10.31004/obsesi.v10i4.8379

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, which were carried out in person or online and lasted 30–40 minutes. Interviews were conducted 1–2 times with each participant to obtain in-depth data and ensure consistency of information. The research instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide developed based on a review of the literature regarding the care of children with ASD and the role of fathers. The interview guide covered several key aspects, namely: (1) Perceptions of the father's role and involvement, (2) Forms of the father's involvement in daily caregiving. During the interview process, the researcher used probing to elicit more in-depth information based on the participants' responses. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder with the participants' permission.

This study employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which includes the following stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, themes based on initial coding, review of themes, defining and labeling themes, and report writing. During the initial coding stage, the researcher applied in vivo coding to identify words or phrases that emerged from the participants so that the original meaning was preserved (Manning, 2017). The interpretation process used a phenomenological approach according to Creswell, distinguishing between textural description and structural description to understand the essence of the fathers' experiences and relate them to the research question (Creswell, 2014).



To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher employed source and temporal triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from several participants with different backgrounds and experiences. Additionally, member checking was applied by reconfirming the initial interpretation with participants to ensure the meaning aligns with their original experiences (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). Temporal triangulation was conducted by collecting data at different times to assess the consistency of information provided by participants. Interviews were conducted with the subjects at several different time points.

Result and Discussion

This study focuses on two interrelated research questions. To answer these questions, data analysis yielded six main themes representing the process of meaning-making, role dynamics, and fathers' involvement in parenting. These themes include a father's inner struggle in his parenting role, sources of fathers' resilience in parenting practices, negotiation of fathers' roles in parenting, fathers' emotional involvement through adaptive interactions, parental collaboration in child-rearing, and stereotypes regarding fathers' roles and parenting styles. These six themes are then positioned to explain the relationship between fathers' interpretations of their roles (RQ 1) and the forms of their involvement in the care of children with ASD (RQ 2), which will be further elaborated in the results section.

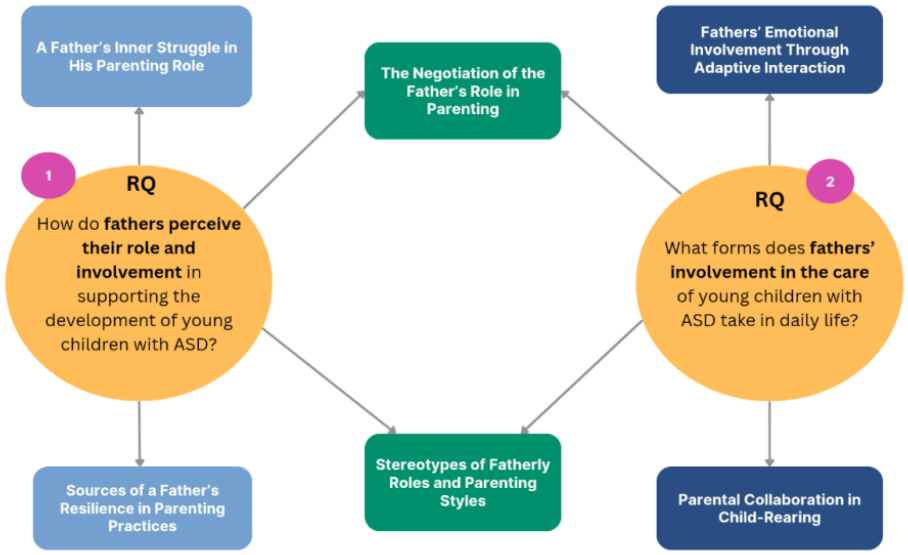


Figure 1. Mind Map of the relationship between Theme and RQ

DOI: 10.31004/obsesi.v10i4.8379

A Father's Inner Struggle in His Parenting Role

Fathers experience persistent feelings of worry and anxiety as they reflect on their children's well-being, particularly when envisioning their children's future. These concerns stem from uncertainty about their children's circumstances as they approach adulthood, which disturbs the fathers' peace of mind.

"*If these anxious feelings persist, it's what will keep my heart from finding peace once they grow up, Miss*" (Mr. Y)

The anxiety that arises becomes part of the father's emotional dynamics as he interprets and fulfills his role, stemming from his self-reflection on the limitations of time, which triggers a sense of not yet being able to become an ideal figure in parenting.

"*I still haven't succeeded, in my personal opinion, because there's little time to spend with the child*" (Mr. Y)

Nevertheless, in making sense of his child's development through a process of self-reflection and acceptance that forms gradually, the father demonstrates an effort to accept this situation with a realistic and reflective attitude.

Sources of Fathers' Resilience in Parenting Practices

In caring for a child with ASD, fathers face ongoing emotional demands whether related to the need for intensive care, the child's limitations, or anxiety about the child's future. These circumstances require fathers to develop resilience so they can continue to fulfill their parenting role consistently. This resilience naturally stems from several aspects, such as the process of acceptance, emotional regulation, and personal and spiritual interpretations of the child's condition.

"Well, for me, I just leave everything to God. So I believe and am confident that whatever we do the therapies we undergo K might gradually change. My faith is rooted in that belief, accompanied by prayer, and I trust the outcome will be good…" (Mr. F)

In addition to the effort to accept and carry out the parenting role with patience, fathers' resilience is built through personal and spiritual faith. This faith helps regulate the father's emotions, thereby reducing anxiety especially regarding the uncertainty of the child's future development. In this context, the process of making sense of the situation involves trust, hope, and surrender to God as a source of psychological strength.

"Well, how do I put it, as a parent I have to be patient… (Mr. Y)

Support from the immediate environment also plays a role in strengthening the father's resilience in practicing parenting a child with ASD. This support comes not only from the spouse but also from the extended family and social peers around the father. In interviews conducted with the parents as a couple, the mother revealed the involvement of family and friends who indirectly provided reinforcement for the father in the parenting process.

"The closest support system is the family, then my friends and his friends…" (Mrs. A)

"The family gives encouragement; sometimes they suggest bringing her to this hospital" (Mr. Y)

The father's resilience in caring for a child with ASD is shaped by a combination of religious beliefs as a source of psychological strength and social support from family and the immediate environment, which act as external reinforcements that sustain this resilience. Thus, the father's resilience is built through the interaction of internal and external factors, enabling him to consistently fulfill his parenting role amidst the limitations and demands he faces.

Negotiating the Father's Role in Parenting

In raising a child with ASD, fathers face a balancing act between work and the need for regular caregiving. Fathers define their role in parenting by adjusting their involvement outside of work hours. This situation reflects a division of roles, in which the father takes on the role of primary breadwinner, while daily caregiving is primarily carried out by the mother.

"... I'm involved, but not full-time the main thing is providing for the family" (Mr. Y)

Time constraints and the division of roles within the family are factors that influence fathers' involvement in the child-rearing process. One such factor is the negotiation of roles between work demands and the child's therapy needs, which impacts the continuity of the therapy the child receives. The father's time constraints due to work prevent therapy sessions that should be conducted regularly from continuing.

"Work demands for the family, but on the other hand, the child should be receiving regular therapy. If they overlap, there's no time. I'd like regular therapy, but if it conflicts with work, it's not possible because the father is the one who takes the child, and the mother can't" (Mr. Y)

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Fathers position themselves as the primary breadwinners, with time constraints affecting their direct involvement in supporting the child's therapy and daily activities. Negotiating these roles is not only about time management but also impacts the patterns of a father's involvement in child-rearing.

Fathers' Emotional Involvement Through Adaptive Interaction

A father's emotional involvement is manifested through adaptive interactions in the child's daily life. Fathers are not only physically present but also attuned to the child's emotional needs and developmental progress. When dealing with a child's emotional responses, fathers demonstrate an understanding of the child's emotional regulation patterns by giving the child space during mild tantrums, as expressed by:

"If I just leave her alone, she'll fall asleep by herself in her room… her just throws a tantrum for a bit and then falls asleep" (Mr. Y).

This response exemplifies adaptive parenting aimed at helping the child self-soothe. Additionally, fathers' emotional involvement is evident through physical care activities from an early age, such as bathing and feeding the child. These activities serve as a means of fostering emotional closeness between father and child.

"From a young age… his father was the one who bathed her" (Mr. Y)
"I often bathe her… and when it's time for school, I sometimes feed her too" (Mr. F)

Furthermore, fathers actively set aside time to interact and play with their children, both at home and outdoors. Such interactions take the form of simple activities like playing at home, riding around on a motorcycle, or visiting Grandma's house often done just the two of them. This demonstrates an effort to create quality time with the child. He also strives to engage in stimulating the child's communication and cognitive development, such as helping the child practice speaking skills, giving instructions, and accompanying learning activities like reading books and having light discussions. This guidance is provided adaptively, tailored to the child's interests.

"I play with her, take her for walks, sometimes to her grandmother's house, or teach her to speak clearly" (Mr. Y)
"At home, we play maybe catch a ball… make a simple coversation with K… when she reads books, I explain things along the way… she learns from any book she likes without being taught, since she often watches YouTube too; but now her screen time on the phone has started to decrease" (Mr. F).

A father's emotional involvement in raising a child with ASD can be demonstrated through consistent, responsive, and adaptive presence in daily life. Fathers build emotional closeness through caregiving activities, play interactions, and communication stimulation tailored to the child's needs and characteristics. These practices reflect the father's understanding of the child's condition as well as his efforts to remain emotionally engaged. Thus, a father's involvement serves not merely as a complement to the mother's role but as a vital component in supporting the emotional and social development of children with ASD.

Parental Collaboration in Child-Rearing

Collaboration between fathers and mothers in raising children with ASD is demonstrated through flexible, complementary role-sharing and joint involvement in parenting decisions. Although this does not always proceed ideally or consistently, parents strive to adapt their respective roles according to the situation and the child's needs. In daily practice, fathers do not merely act as supporters but also serve as a balancing force in parenting dynamics, particularly when there are differences in approach between fathers and mothers.

"As for me, I try to… because my wife is a bit strict with K, so I take the softer approach… I also tell my wife not to be too strict." (Mr. F)

These differences in parenting styles are part of the collaborative dynamics parents navigate. Fathers often take on a more persuasive role when mothers are in a highly emotional state. Beyond emotional approaches, collaboration is also evident in the division of practical parenting responsibilities. Fathers are willing to take over parenting tasks when mothers have time constraints or other commitments, such as taking the child to school or therapy.

"Sometimes, if I'm worried about being late, I ask Dad to take her, and the same goes for therapy." (Mrs. A)

Parental collaboration is also reflected in the father's involvement in key parenting moments, such as school meetings, parenting workshops, and consultations with a psychologist. The mother consciously encourages the father's presence to ensure shared understanding regarding the child's development and needs.

"For those important moments, I ask Dad to come along so he also knows how K is doing at school." (Mrs. A)

DOI: 10.31004/obsesi.v10i4.8379

However, parenting collaboration does not unfold the same way in every family, as each family has its own way of carrying out parenting roles. For example, in other families there is a mutual agreement, but practices on the ground often adapt to the family's specific situation and conditions.

"There is an agreement, but the practice is sometimes different." (Mr. Y)

Overall, these findings suggest that parental collaboration in raising children with ASD is dynamic and situational, depending on family circumstances and the child's needs. This collaboration not only demonstrates a flexible division of roles but also strengthens fathers' involvement in parenting, both emotionally and practically. This underscores that fathers' involvement is not isolated but is integrated into a complementary family caregiving system.

Stereotypes of Fatherly Roles and Parenting Styles

A father's role in raising a child with ASD is shaped not only by his personal experiences but also by his partner's perceptions and the social constructs prevalent in the surrounding community. Stereotypes portraying fathers as typically indifferent or emotionally detached still persist and influence how fathers are positioned in parenting practices.

"*It's common, right? Fathers tend to be more indifferent like that." (*Mrs. A)

This social construct not only influences how fathers are perceived by their environment but also affects how they fulfill their roles in daily parenting practices. In certain situations, fathers tend to avoid conflict or children's reactions such as tantrums, leading them to adopt a more permissive approach.

"If my child asks for something, I give in… I'm afraid she'll throw a tantrum." (Mr. F)

Fathers also face social pressure in the form of expectations from their surroundings regarding their children's development. Comments or judgments from the surrounding community can affect a father's psychological state as he fulfills his role as a parent of a child with ASD.

"If you have a child like that, you have to be strong against what the neighbors say." (Mr. Y)

Social pressure and entrenched stereotypes indicate that a father's role is not formed individually but is influenced by complex external factors. In this context, fathers not only strive to meet their children's needs but must also adapt to the social demands of their environment. This also impacts the development of a father's parenting style toward a child with ASD. Stereotypes that portray fathers as less emotional limit their optimal involvement, while social pressure demands that fathers possess psychological resilience in facing stigma. Therefore, a more inclusive understanding of the father's role is essential to support more adaptive fatherly involvement in raising a child with ASD.

Discussion

The role of fathers in raising children with ASD in this study is characterized as dynamic and contextual, shaped through a reflective process that involves emotional, social, and structural aspects. These findings confirm that fathers' involvement is not merely understood in terms of physical presence but rather as an adaptive process influenced by personal experiences, family relationships, and the surrounding social pressures.

Emotionally, the interpretation of the father's role evolves through a gradual process marked by dynamics ranging from anxiety and uncertainty to acceptance, shaped by the experience of facing the diagnosis and adjusting expectations regarding the child's condition. In line with the concept of parental acceptance, this is understood as an adaptive strategy involving grief, optimism, and resilience in parenting (Dewi et al., 2024; Kearney & Griffin, 2001; Lupo et al., 2024). This process reflects fathers' self-adjustment in facing the uncertainty of their child's future with ASD, which subsequently becomes a source of reflection in constructing the meaning of parenting (Ganjeh et al., 2020; Rafferty et al., 2020). In this study, fathers demonstrated active efforts to be emotionally present despite facing significant psychological pressure.

This study also shows that spirituality serves as an important coping mechanism in the fathers' adaptation process. An approach to spirituality through patience, prayer, and surrender not only functions as emotional regulation but also shapes how fathers perceive their role as a responsibility undertaken with awareness and resolve. This aligns with research indicating that spirituality and religiosity play a role in enhancing the psychological resilience of parents of children with special needs (Despriyanti, 2024; Tahitu, 2022). Other research suggests that religious coping can help fathers accept their child's condition, manage their emotions, find meaning and hope, and strengthen their resilience (Prameswari et al., 2022). Therefore, spirituality in this study contributes to the sustained involvement of fathers in parenting.

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In the context of their social roles, fathers face the dual demands of being breadwinners and being involved in child-rearing. The length of fathers' work hours limits their involvement in childcare while simultaneously placing them under pressure between their responsibilities as breadwinners and as parents, thereby prompting fathers to adjust their roles through a process of negotiation between economic responsibilities and involvement in childcare (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2021; Langley, 2025; Ochi et al., 2024). These findings align with the concept of the work–family interface, which posits that work roles and family roles often influence one another and require individuals to make role compromises so that both can function adaptively (Voydanoff, 2005). In an ecological context, work demands as part of the exosystem also influence the father's role within the family microsystem, particularly in the care of children with ASD (Bronfrenbernner, 1979).

This negotiation of roles shapes how fathers interpret their involvement in the care of children with ASD. A father's role is not measured by the amount of time or the intensity of his presence, but rather by his commitment to remain present and take responsibility within the limits of what is feasible (Hardiningrum et al., 2024). This finding aligns with the perspective of Lamb et al. (1987), who emphasize that a father's involvement encompasses dimensions of emotional commitment and responsibility, not merely physical presence (Cabrera et al., 2000). Furthermore, research on the care of children with special needs indicates that fathers often develop forms of involvement tailored to structural limitations and family needs as an adaptive strategy to maintain their caregiving role (Gadot et al., 2025; Perzolli et al., 2023). Thus, role negotiation in this study represents how fathers construct a realistic, sustainable, and commitment-oriented meaning of the parenting role.

Furthermore, fathers' involvement in the care of children with ASD does not stand alone but is embedded in a collaborative relationship with the mother. This collaboration allows fathers to remain involved in caregiving even though their primary role is not always that of the primary caregiver (Hadi, 2024). This finding aligns with the coparenting framework proposed by Feinberg, (2003) which emphasizes that the quality of cooperation between parents plays a crucial role in the continuity of child care, particularly in families with children with special needs. From an ecological perspective, collaboration between fathers and mothers reflects interactions within the family microsystem, where relationships among adult individuals shape the child-rearing experience (Santrock, 2007). Thus, fathers' involvement in this study cannot be separated from the dynamics of their relationship with mothers, as parental collaboration is a key factor enabling fathers' roles to remain adaptive and sustainable.

Research findings indicate that social stereotypes regarding the father's role as a figure primarily focused on economic responsibilities continue to influence parenting practices. These stereotypes shape social expectations that a father's involvement in parenting is secondary to that of the mother, particularly when it comes to child-rearing (Gunawan & Nurwati, 2020; Lee & Woojong, 2025). In this context, fathers do not position themselves as the primary caregiver striving to embody an ideal like a mother, but rather as a figure who is present and contributes according to their capacity and a previously negotiated role (Lien et al., 2020). Thus, the fathers' parenting styles in this study represent an adaptive form of parenting, in which fathers do not merely reproduce stereotypical fatherly roles but negotiate them to align with their children's needs and family dynamics.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the concept of father involvement as a contextual and relational process. These findings also emphasize the importance of role negotiation and flexibility in the division of responsibilities as part of co-parenting. Practically, this study highlights the importance of actively involving fathers in intervention programs for children with special needs. Additionally, social support from the surrounding community needs to be strengthened to reduce stigma and enhance fathers' self-confidence in fulfilling their parenting roles. This study has limitations, particularly regarding potential interpretive bias and social desirability in the interview process. Therefore, future research is recommended to use a mixed-methods or longitudinal approach and to involve fathers with more diverse backgrounds to enrich our understanding of the dynamics of fathers' roles in caring for children with ASD.

Conclusion

This study shows that fathers' understanding of their role in raising children with ASD is shaped through a dynamic and reflective process, shaped by emotional experiences, a process of acceptance, role negotiation, and social interactions with their social environment and family. Fathers interpret their roles not only through physical presence or meeting economic needs, but also through emotional involvement, adaptive parenting practices, and collaboration with mothers in supporting their children. In this process, spirituality, social support, and family relationships serve as vital sources of resilience for fathers in coping with the pressures of

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parenting and social stigma. The findings of this study confirm that the father's role in raising children with ASD is contextual, relational, and continuously negotiated in accordance with family dynamics and the child's needs.

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