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# Relationship Stress Levels and Parenting Mothers of Children with Autism

*by Dwi Ernawati*

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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Relationship Stress Levels and Parenting Mothers of Children with Autism

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Autism is a developmental disorder that affects the way the children see the world and learn from experience. Mothers of children with autism in families often feel stressed so that it can affect the patterns of care provided to children with autism. This study aims to identify the relationship between stress levels and parenting styles of mothers of children with autism. **Methods:** The design used Cross-Sectional. The population was mothers of children with autism at Autism Therapy Center in Surabaya, with a total sample of 24 people selected with random sampling technique. The independent variable is the stress level in mothers, and the dependent variable is mothers' parenting styles. The instrument used questionnaires. Data were analyzed using Spearman's rho test. **Results:** Based on Spearman's rho test,  $\rho = 0.003$  and  $r = 0.577$ . there is a moderate relationship between stress levels and parenting styles of mothers of children with autism. **Conclusion:** This research suggests strategies to help the family and the therapists to overcome the stress experienced by the mothers. This study will help to apply good and right parenting styles to children with autism.

**Keywords:** Parental Stress, Parenting Styles, Child Autism

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### INTRODUCTION

Children with autism disorder suffer from neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by restricted interests and repetitive behaviors. Usually, these children are less interested in making social contacts, and there is no eye contact (1). Parents often observe and compare their children's condition with other children. When the parents understand that their infant is not ideal according to other normal children, numerous emotional turmoil are displayed. The excitement can turn into disappointment. The problems associated with caring for children for mothers with autistic are very hard, as a mother is the first person to care for the child (2).

Even though every child has the right to best and correct parenting style, not only normal children, autistic children also need a parenting style that is quite complex and relevant to their problems because not all autistic children have the same characteristics and needs. authoritative parenting is indeed the most ideal that is applicable for both normal children and children with autism. Nevertheless, sometimes this parental style is affected because of the limitations of autistic children about seeing situations and conditions (3). Based on the

results of interviews with mothers with autistic children at Autism Therapy Center, Surabaya, it was found that these mothers felt stressed because they are unable to accept their situation, they face difficulties in caring for their children and cannot bear the stigma from society associated with autistic children. They were stressed because of worries about their child's future. In front of the child, they had to rely on their independence. As a result, mothers who have autistic children applied permissive parenting and authoritarian parenting for the benefit of the situation.

The number of children affected by autism is increasing rapidly in various parts of the world. The incidence of autism worldwide is estimated to be between 6.5–6.6 per 1000 children (4). Since 1980, there has been an increase of up to 40% in Canada and Japan. In the United States, autism occurs among 60,000-15,000 children under the age of fifteen. According to the Autism Research Institute in San Diego, the number of people with autism in 1987 was estimated to be 1: 5000 children. At the beginning of 2002, the incidence of autism increased very rapidly in the UK, suspected to occur in 1 in 100 children. This number has overgrown, and in 2005, it became 1: 160 children. According to The Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDMM), the number of people with autism in the United States at the end of 2009 was found to be 1:110 in children aged eight years diagnosed with autism. In Indonesia the exact number of people with autism is not

known yet, but it is estimated that more than 400,000 children to be affected with this abnormality. The ratio of children with autism between boys and girls is 2.6-4: 1 (5). The study results conducted by Shehu et al. (2021) indicated the significant influence of ethnicity on ASD symptoms in children, adolescents, and adults (6). Based on a preliminary study, the number of children with autism at Autism Therapy of Anak Terang was 35 people. Furthermore, after conducting interviews with mothers with autistic children at autism therapy of Anak Terang Surabaya, five mothers experienced stress, including two mothers who experienced high stress, two mothers who experienced moderate stress, and one mother who experienced moderate stress. 70% of them applied permissive parenting, 20% applied authoritarian parenting, and 10% used authoritative parenting.

Children with autism are a burden for families because they require constant attention and drain energy and savings. This kind of situation causes prolonged stress in the family. Changes are very pronounced in family interactions and long-term planning. There have been changes in the application of discipline, modes of communication, recreational activities, and even the types of food enjoyed at home.

Several studies have shown that mothers have a heavier burden in caring for children with autism than fathers and feel stressed. Mother of children with autism experience higher stress than felt by fathers (7). The parenting style is the best way that parents can educate their children as a manifestation and sense of responsibility to the children (8). The impact of stress experienced by mothers with autistic children will change the parenting styles given to these children. In authoritative parenting, parents provide practical guidance, consistent reinforcement, and sensitivity and acceptance. While in authoritative parenting, parents provide practical guidance, consistent reinforcement, and sensitivity and acceptance. In authoritarian parenting, there are many rules and demands, little explanation, and less sensitivity to children's needs and understanding. Whereas, parents will have few regulations and orders in permissive parenting where children are free to obey their wishes. These changes in parenting styles lead to reduced interaction between parents and children. The shift in the roles of family members affects the mental health of family members, especially their children.

The coping strategies are needed by parents experiencing high stress while caring for autistic children. Nurse practitioners are essential professional and social support for families with autistic children (9). Nurses are needed to teach families about effective coping strategies in dealing with parental problems with autistic children. Mothers with autistic children need to overcome stress by implementing effective coping strategies. The coping strategy is expected to reduce maternal pressure in dealing with children with autism to carry out their

parenting roles properly. The right parenting style applied by parents for children with autism is authoritative parenting because democratization and openness in the atmosphere of family life are essential conditions for the recognition of parents conduct towards their children and the world of children conducted by parents and life situations (10). This study would focus on the relationship between stress levels and parenting styles of mothers with autistic children at Autism Therapy of Anak Terang Surabaya.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research used a cross-sectional design with a correlational analytic approach. The research was conducted at "Anak Terang" Autism Therapy Center in Surabaya, Indonesia. The samples in this research were 24 mothers with autistic children selected by simple random sampling. Inclusion criteria were Mothers with autistic children aged 2-5 years and underwent therapy for <2 months. The stress level of the mother and parenting style was measured by questionnaire.

The mother's stress level questionnaire was developed from DASS (Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale) consisting of 42 questions. DASS 42 is divided into 3 indicators, which are depression, anxiety, and stress. This research only focuses on the stress indicator, consisting of 14 questions developed from the DASS questionnaire. The 14 questions on the stress questionnaire focus on the stress symptoms experienced by the respondent. The severity of stress is determined from the answer options; 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often, 3 = always feel symptoms.

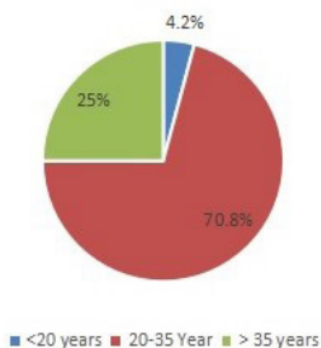
Parenting style was measured by questionnaire which were developed from Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire-Short Version (PSDQ). The questionnaire consists of 30 items covering the domains of warmth and control. Each statement item was rated on a scale of 1 to 5. The highest score indicates each parent's main parenting style. The authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive parenting styles are then classified.

Data collection was carried out after obtaining a permit and approval from the ethical committee of STIKES Hang Tuah Surabaya with the number of PE/56/IV/2020/KEPK/SHT. A permit was submitted to the Head of Anak Terang Surabaya to obtain permission to conduct this research. As a first step in the research, the approach was made to get approval from the study's subject or the respondent. A questionnaire was distributed to 24 mothers with autism at Autism Therapy of Anak Terang Surabaya.

## RESULTS

### General Data of Respondents' Demographics

From figure 1, it was shown that the age of mothers with

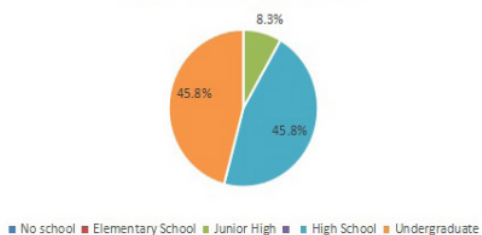


**Figure 1: Characteristics of respondents based on age of mothers**

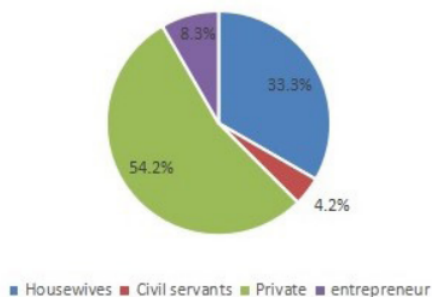
autistic children, were between 20-35 years among 17 people (70.8%), > 35 years were as many as six people (25.0%), and <20 years was as many as one person (4.2%).

5

Based on figure 2, it was found that the education level of mothers who have children with autism was 11 people graduated from University (45.8%), 11 people graduated from Senior High School (45.8%), 2 people graduated from Junior High School (8.3%). Based on figure 3, it was found that the jobs of mothers who have children with autism were private employees as many as 13 people (54.2%), housewives as many as 8 people (33.3%), entrepreneurs as many as 2 people (8.3%), and Civil Servants as many as one person (4.2 %).



**Figure 2: Characteristics of respondents based on occupation of mothers**



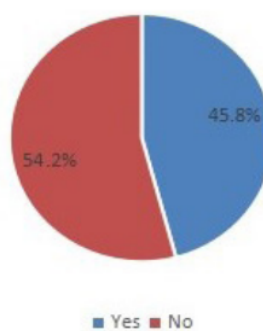
**Figure 3: Characteristics of respondents based on education level of mothers**

Based on figure 4, it was found that there were caregivers for mothers who have children with autism in which there were no caregivers for 13 people (54.2%), and there were 11 mothers (45.8%) having caregivers.

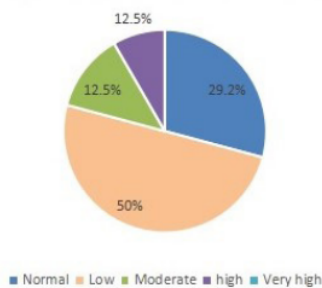
**Special Data**

Figure 5 showed that mothers who have autistic children with low stress were 12 people (50.0%), normal stress levels were seven people (29.2%), moderate stress levels were three people (12.5%), high-stress levels were two people (8.3 %), and there is no very high stress.

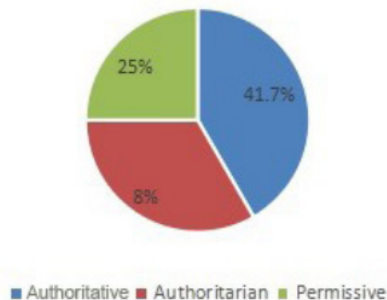
Figure 6 above showed that mothers with autistic children applied authoritative parenting as many as ten people (41.7%), authoritarian parenting as many as eight people (33.3%), and permissive parenting as many as six people (25.0%).



**Figure 4: Characteristics of respondents based on presence of caregivers**



**Figure 5: Characteristics of respondents based on stress levels in mothers with autistic children**



**Figure 6: Characteristics of respondents based on parenting patterns for mothers with autistic children**

Table 1 showed that from 12 mothers who experienced low stress, six people (50.0%) applied authoritarian parenting. Authoritative parenting was applied by three people (25.0%), and those who used permissive parenting were three people (50.0%). Of the seven mothers who experienced normal stress, there were six people (85.7%) who applied authoritative parenting, one person (14.3%) who applied authoritarian parenting, and 1 person (33.3%) who used authoritative parenting. Of the three mothers who experienced moderate stress, 2 mothers (66.7%) applied permissive parenting, and 1 mother (33.3%) applied authoritative parenting. Of the two mothers who experienced high stress, one person (50.0%) used authoritarian parenting, and 1 person (50.0%) applied permissive parenting. The Spearman's rho test results showed that the value of  $r = 0.577$  with a value of  $p = 0.003$  and a value of  $r = 0.40 - 0.599$ . It means a moderate relationship between the stress levels and parenting styles of mothers who have children with autism.

**Table 1: The Relationship between Stress Level and Parenting Patterns of Mothers with Autistic Children**

Stress Level	Parenting Style						Total	
	democratic		authoritarian		permissive		N	%
	f	%	f	%	f	%		
Normal	6	85.7	1	14.3	0	0	7	100
Low	3	25	6	50	3	25	12	100
Moderate	1	33.3	0	0	2	66.7	3	100
High	0	0	1	50	1	50	2	100
Total	10	41.7	8	33.3	6	25	24	100

Spearman's rho 0.003 (p<0.05)

## DISCUSSION

### Stress Levels in Mothers with Autistic Children at Autism Therapy of Anak Terang Surabaya

Many studies have been conducted on parents of children with autism. This study focused on the level of stress on mother with autistic children. The results showed that the level of maternal stress is low-stress level (50%, 12 people) among most of the mothers. Level of stress in category normal stress as many as 7 people (29.2%), moderate stress as many as 3 people (12.5%), and high stress as many as 2 people (8.3%).

Based on the results of this study, mothers with severe stress tend to choose the answer "always" on the stress symptom score on the questionnaire. Question number 1 (Q1) in DASS Questionnaire shows that parents with high-stress levels felt easily angry with trivial things and had difficulties taking a rest (Q8). In addition, the mother also feels to overreact in every situation (Q2), has difficulties relaxing (Q3), and is very irritable (Q9). The combination of high-stress levels in the mother is caused by the daily challenges while caring for the child which are endless taking into consideration all aspects of the child's care and the parent's mental health along with the ability to manage the child's needs and family (11).

The results of the study showed that mothers with low-stress levels were as many as 12 people (50%) answered 14 DASS questions on a score of 1 (sometimes) and 2 (often). Mothers expressed that they are easily irritated (Q4), impatient to experience procrastination or to wait for something (Q6), find it difficult to rest (Q8). They cannot tolerate anything obstructing them from doing something (Q13) and are easily restless (Q14).

On the other hand, mothers with moderate stress showed varying frequencies of stress symptoms. Meanwhile, mothers with moderate stress levels answered a score of 1 (sometimes), 2 (often), and 3 (always) on the 14 questions of the DASS Questionnaire. All respondents chose a score of 2 (often) on the point of being difficult to get rest (Q8), and 2 people (66%) always restless (Q14). The parents with autistic symptoms disorder (ASD) children, feel stressed due to their child and parental domains. The child domain consists of hyperactivity, adaptability, acceptability. Parent reinforces, demandingness, and mood. On the other side, the parental domain consists of a sense of competence, social isolation, attachment, parent health, role restriction, depression, relationship with the spouse (12). The higher the severity of ASD symptoms, the higher the level of parental stress. Based on respondents' answers to the DASS questionnaire, the source of stress experienced by parents with low, moderate, and high-stress levels of stress came from parental domain depression, as indicated by the high score of stress symptoms experienced. This can also be exacerbated by the source of stress that comes from the child domain, which is the severity of autism among the child.

In parents with normal stress, no one gets a score of 3 (always) on all questions on the DASS questionnaire. Respondents scored 0 (never) and 1 (sometimes) on almost all 14 questions of the DASS questionnaire. There was 1 respondent with normal stress, indicating the answer "always" on the point "has spent energy to feel anxious" but balanced on other questions, choosing "never" and "sometimes". This shows that parents have a good coping strategy against the challenges of care for autistic children that they have to face. As a result, a more effective stress management strategies and prevention programs must be developed (12).

In this study, social support is relatively balanced for all respondents. Social support is seen from the presence or absence of a helper to ease the mother's task, parents' income, parents' occupation, relationship with spouse, and educational background. The results of cross-tabulation with stress levels show the distribution of low, moderate, and high-stress levels evenly. This shows good social support, as most respondents indicated in the normal and low-stress range. The role of the family in therapist activities is needed. The care for the family is necessary for providing anticipatory guidelines for the interaction of parents with children, to learn the

use of effective response patterns for better behavior of the children (13). Thus, the interaction of parents and children can create optimal situation for better development of autistic children.

5 Social support may also reduce the impact of stress and depression on mothers of children with autism, implying that social support plays an essential role in protecting mental health of parents with children having developmental difficulties (14). Social support is positively related to family cohesion and adaptability. The findings in the study prove that the importance of different types of social support. Appropriate social support can be used to develop targeted support services for families with children with autism to improve their family functioning and support the family unit (15). It is important to promote coping orientations for mothers' involvement in their children's behavior to help them withstand the effects of stress (16). A potential source of coping strategies among mothers of children with autism is associated with relatively low levels of stress due to family disharmony, personal problems, the child's health situation, and financial problems (17). Attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts that are positive, flexible, rational, are adaptive coping mechanisms to manage stress. Parents' positive attitudes and beliefs make their burden lighter, and they tend to experience lesser stress.

#### Parenting for Mothers with Autistic Children at Autism Therapy of Anak Terang Surabaya

The parenting styles used by parents of children with ASD were identified in this study. Parenting styles might be classified as authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. The authoritative parenting style was the highest percentage (41.7%) of usage among the three parenting styles.

The characteristics of respondents with the authoritative parenting style in this study are indicated by parents giving children more opportunities to make decisions from several choices. In this condition, the parent makes some combination authoritative parenting style. The parent does not give the order, but the parent creates several alternatives that the child can choose. Parents still control their child by making some alternative that they can tolerate, but they do not force their child. With this condition, the authoritative parenting style is best adapted to the symptoms of autism in children.

The parents in this study may have rated authoritative parenting higher than other parenting styles because they felt more effective when they used a more warm approach with their ASD child, implying increased use of authoritative parenting is associated with increased parental involvement efficacy (18). Children educated by authoritative parents had superior social and instrumental competence compared to children raised by authoritarian parents. Similarly, in a population of children with developmental disabilities, it was

discovered that a positive parenting approach, including authoritative parenting, is moderately associated with better behavioral outcomes for the child (19). Thus, opting for an authoritative parenting approach may help produce positive outcomes, even in ASD children, with the proper practice and knowledge concerning its effectiveness. This supports the idea of encouraging efforts to assess and promote effective parenting skills as part of the care provided for children with ASD or other similar disabilities.

8 Based on the results of the research table, it also shows that 8 respondents apply authoritarian parenting (33.3%). In authoritarian parenting parents order their children to complete their tasks (Q17). This is done when parents control the behavior of their children. The autistic children tend to "live in their own world" so that parents view absolute control as the best way to raise children and make the children realize the situation in real life. The authoritarian parenting style is applied by the parents, determining the limits and rules by themselves. These limits and rules must be obeyed by the children without taking into account the wishes and circumstances of the children. Besides that, there is a lack of two-way communication between the parents and their children (20).

Children under authoritarian parenting style can become obedient individuals because of the feelings of fear towards their parents. The parents are more dominant and determine everything in the child's life. The child's sole position is as the object of implementation. If the child is guided by an authoritarian parenting style, the child is likely to grow up timid, anxious, and less adaptive (21). In contrast, parents use an authoritarian parenting style to ASD make their children adapt to real life and develop independence.

Based on the study results, it was found that as many as 6 respondents (25%) apply the permissive parenting style. Parents using the permissive parenting style revealed that they gave more freedom to children to develop (Q22) and let children take decisions to do what they wanted (Q30). Parents do this because parents do not have the heart when their children cry or want something. Based on the cross-tabulation results, permissive parenting is more common in parents of toddlers because their tantrums are more often. So, when a child has a tantrum, the parents immediately obey. Often permissive parenting is applied between warm and loving or intolerant parents because children are difficult to control. Warmth tends to spoil the children. This can cause the children to be aggressive, disobey their parents, feel powerful, and be less able to control themselves. Children with parenting that involves freedom without conditions mean that they choose to do whatever they want (22). In this situation parents do not have control over their children, and sometimes they act so intolerant that they tend to ignore them. Parents who

use the permissive parenting style give their children the freedom to determine their activities and behavior. The parents usually provide leeway when supervising, and their children can do something with only a little supervision. The children will tend to do things they like because they feel left alone by their parents. This can impact the children's behavior as they tend to become selfish and less respectful towards their parents.

### **The Relationship between Stress Levels and Parenting Styles of Mothers with Autistic Children at Autism Therapy of Anak Terang Surabaya**

This study found a moderate relationship between stress levels and parenting styles of mothers with ASD ( $p = 0,003$ ,  $r = 0,577$ ). Findings suggested that parenting style sometimes becomes a coping strategy to control mother's stress level with ASD. Most mothers with normal stress levels use the authoritative parenting style (6 mothers, 85.7%) and authoritarian parenting style (1 mother, 14.3%). When parents adopt an authoritative parenting style, stress levels among parents can be minimized. In addition, it was found that 12 people had low-stress levels in which they applied authoritarian parenting style (6 mothers, 50.0%).

Authoritative parenting is a good stress coping strategy as the children can be controlled more effectively. However, the complexity of caring for autistic children and the severity of autism in children can cause parents to be overstressed. Children who remain uncontrolled will increase the level of stress on parents. Some parents apply authoritarian and permissive parenting styles to deal with stress in dealing with autistic children.

Moreover, mothers of autistic children with moderate stress levels were 3 mothers, divided into permissive parenting 2 people (66.7%) and authoritative parenting style 1 mother (33.3%). Furthermore, two mothers had high-stress levels balance in authoritarian parenting style and permissive parenting style. The different parenting style done by mothers with high stress is a coping mechanism for their stress. Permissive parenting style helps the mothers to save energy, but this condition may exacerbate the severity of ASD. Nevertheless, on the other side, parents use authoritarian coping mechanism to control their child that create limitations and orientation for their child in the real world.

According to several studies, raising a child with ASD may have a detrimental influence on parenting. Due to the absence of reciprocal interactions and the prevalence of communication problems, children with ASD may experience less parental warmth and exhibit more protective and controlling behavior (23). Mothers of children with ASD who experienced clinically significant levels of parental stress and suffered from increased psychopathology were less loving. They exhibited greater control than mothers of normally developing children (24).

Children with autism are a burden for families because they require constant attention and drain energy and savings. Parents of children with special needs experience a much heavier stress burden than other parents, which is a consequence of daily childcare responsibilities (25). The source of stress varies greatly, one of which is pressure. The pressure in caring for a child with special needs is felt by parents, especially mothers. Mothers are more dominant in experiencing problems when dealing with their children (26). The impact of stress experienced by mothers with autistic children will change the parenting styles. Parents' high stress is associated with less cooperation, less sensitivity, and more intrusive parenting styles (27).

Additionally, parenting style may aid coping strategies of parents for dealing with the stresses associated with managing maladaptive behaviors in children with ASD. Conversely, the tremendous difficulties associated with parenting a child with ASD may affect the style a parent selects. To assist children with ASD, parenting therapies should minimize parenting stress for this vulnerable and highly stressed group (28).

This coping strategy is expected to reduce maternal pressure in dealing with children with autism to carry out their parenting roles properly. An increasing number of researches have been conducted on the coping strategies adopted by parents of children with ASD to cope with their stress and other mental health problems. Educational intervention programs were reported to have effectively reduced parenting stress and improved coping mechanisms among parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (29). One coping mechanism is self-regulation strategies that will help the child maintain an optimal level of arousal, enhancing learning and functional abilities. Autistic children can learn to self-regulate or become comfortable with sensory stimulation. Play therapy is proposed to operate at the child's current level and is highly individualized (30).

Parents method of coping with the emotional issues and diagnosis varies, but consistently, parents report that a strong social support network is necessary for dealing with the problem. Parents of children with ASD reported significantly higher use of several coping strategies (i.e., emotional support, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humor, and religion) than parents with normal children (31).

### **CONCLUSION**

The most parenting style used by mothers with ASD authoritative parenting. There was a moderate relationship between stress levels and parenting styles for mothers with autistic children at autism therapy of Anak Terang Surabaya. Most of the stress experienced by mothers with autistic children was normal stress level in



which they applied authoritative parenting. Researchers suggest that mothers can overcome stress experience felt due to children with autism is by implementing effective coping strategies.

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