

Challenges & Empowerment – Autistic Mothers' Experiences with Parenting and Societal Reactions

E.M.A. Blijd-Hoogewys, MSc, PhD

FANN.netwerk@gmail.com

Background

- Parenthood is challenges; autistic mothers face additional barriers due to **limited support and societal misconceptions** (McDonnell & DeLucia, 2021; Pohl et al., 2020).
- **Key challenges:** prejudice, unsolicited advice, and ableism.
- Despite these barriers, 85% of **autistic mothers find motherhood rewarding**, with satisfaction, effectiveness, and parental stress levels comparable to non-autistic mothers (Lau et al., 2021; Adams et al., 2021).
- The Female Autism Network of the Netherlands (FANN) is a collaborative group of practitioners, researchers, and autistic women.
- FANN's focus: **investigating societal reactions** faced by autistic mothers.
- **Objectives:** Increase awareness, foster inclusivity, and empower autistic mothers.

Methods

Survey:
10 open-ended questions (online)

Participants:

- Total: N = 97 mothers
- Age: $M = 42.16$ years ($SD = 8.23$)
- Age of ASD diagnosis: $M = 36.70$ years ($SD = 10.38$); n = 6 diagnosed before age 18
- Children: $M = 1.98$ ($SD = 0.96$); n = 8 had 4(+) children.

Analysis: Thematic content analysis



Results

Challenges:

- Sensory overload
- Exhaustion
- Fear of failure as a parent
- Masking (hiding fear & discomfort to cope)
- Social avoidance

Societal Reactions:

- Lack of response: due to late diagnosis or reluctance to disclose ASD.
- Dismissive remarks:
 - "I don't think you have autism."*
 - "Having a young family is tough for everyone."*
- Judgment and stigma: questioning their choice to have children, label having children as 'irresponsible'
- Mixed reactions: Some received support, but many faced unsolicited advice & criticism
- Some received only positive reactions:
 - "The kids benefit from your structure and clarity."*

Conclusions

- Autistic mothers call for greater understanding:
 - "Autism is not wrong or limited; it's just a different way of thinking."*
- They emphasize their parenting competence:
 - "We are perfectly capable of raising children, especially autistic children."*

Key takeaways

- Increased awareness of autistic parenting experiences is essential.
- Empowerment and respect should replace judgment and misconceptions.

