

# Parents' Experiences In Aiding Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder In Adapting Routine Changes

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**Abstract-** This qualitative research study investigates parents' experiences in aiding children aged 6-12 with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to adapt to routine changes in Baliwasan, Labuan, and Tetuan, Zamboanga City. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 10 parents using convenience sampling, analyzed via narrative analysis to identify emergent themes. Key findings reveal positive experiences such as children's development of independence in daily routines, effective verbal instructions and modeling, positive behavioral changes through structured routines, improved parent-child communication, parental fulfillment from child progress, and benefits from parental patience and involvement. Challenges included initial resistance with emotional outbursts, tantrums, slow adaptation periods (1-2 months), sensory sensitivities, communication barriers, and balancing family needs. Parents employed effective coping strategies like gradual transitions, positive reinforcement with rewards, visual schedules, social stories, therapy integration, environmental modifications, and community support. These findings align with global and local literature on ASD interventions, emphasizing structured predictability and parental education to reduce distress during transitions. The study underscores the need for family-centered programs, culturally adapted strategies, and enhanced support systems to empower Filipino parents in managing routine changes for children with ASD, informing educators, healthcare professionals, and policymakers.

**Keywords:** Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Parental Experiences, Routine Changes

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## INTRODUCTION

"The first believer in every child who believes in themselves is a parent, as stated by Matthew L. Jacobson". The quote underscores the significant role parents play in nurturing self-confidence in their children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This statement holds even greater importance, as parents must provide unwavering support, patience, and understanding. By having faith in their child's potential, parents become the cornerstone of their child's confidence. A parent's belief in their child, especially one with Autism, serves as the foundation for the child's self-belief, guiding them toward realizing their full potential.

Furthermore, parents of children with Autism often go above and beyond to understand their child's unique needs, seeking strategies that best support their learning and development.

Every human being has a unique routine of their own. Every day in our lives we set goals of what we are supposed to do and what we want to be for the day, with our little bucket list that is filled with random agendas that we will follow and enjoy to the fullest. However, what will happen to the children with Autism Spectrum Disorder if their daily routines get disrupted?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects social communication and is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that can be inherited. This condition is also linked to various non-social symptoms, which include both heightened sensitivity and reduced sensitivity to sensory stimuli, as well as seeking behaviors such as attraction to light, intense gaze at objects, and a fascination with brightly colored objects. These sensory differences, which are now included in the diagnostic criteria for autism, can have significant negative effects on the lives of individuals with autism and their families (Turi et al., 2015).

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2016 (IDEA), The characteristics often linked with autism include participating in repetitive actions and stereotyped movements, difficulties adapting to changes in their environment or daily schedules, and they may show unusual reactions to sensory input. If a child's educational performance is primarily impacted due to an emotional disturbance as defined in [IDEA], then the term autism does not apply.

Boys make up 75% of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and the average age of diagnosis for boys with autism spectrum disorder is 4.2 years old. One out of sixteen diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder are girls, and the average age of diagnosis for girls with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is 6.8 years old (Autism Statistics and Facts in 2024, n.d.) In addition, there is a new report indicates that the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) among 8-year-olds has increased to one in 36 (2.8%) children. This report highlights that, for the first time, rates are now higher for children of races 20 years ago. (CDC, 2023 American Academy of Pediatrics).

In an interview, S.L. Coehlo stated, "Having Autism is a part of my child's life but it doesn't define him the whole him. He is much more than just a diagnosis." Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face various challenges that shape them into effective support systems for these gifted individuals. Some common difficulties faced by parents of children with ASD include financial strains, stress from caregiving responsibilities, limited time for self-care, communication obstacles, and societal stigma.

Moreover, routine changes are another thing that parents of children with autism spectrum disorder may have to deal with. These can include going out of the house, entertaining, visiting a new location like the dentist, alternating between different toys, tasks, or activities, or moving from preferred to less preferred activities. Activities that are performed out of order, such as bathing at an odd hour, can also be difficult. Dressing strangely, like in a new school uniform. It can be difficult when there are changes to the teachers or the activities that are scheduled for the school. It might be difficult to handle situations where some activities are forced to postpone or cancel activities, like when inclement weather prevents you from going to the park. (Common Challenges of Parenting an Autistic Child, n.d.).

This study explored how parents navigate routine transitions, including the strategies they employ to ease their impact on children. The research focused on understanding the emotional, psychological, and practical experiences that parents face, as well as the coping mechanisms they have developed over time. By analyzing their responses, we aimed to uncover common patterns and unique solutions that parents have implemented to effectively address these routine shifts.

Using a qualitative approach and convenience sampling, the researcher collected data from participants in their respective locations: Baliwasan, Labuan, and Tetuan Zamboanga City. The aim of this study is to identify the experiences of parents

from Baliwasan, Labuan, and Tetuan in aiding their children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in adjusting to changes in routine. In the Baliwasan Central School SPED Center, there are 24 students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), while Labuan Central School has 10 students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and the Tetuan Central School SPED Center have 76 students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Through a series of in-depth interviews, we gathered insights into how parents manage the positive and challenges effects of routine changes on their children with ASD and how they cope with these challenges. An audio recorder and structured interview questions was used to seek answers to the study's research questions.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the parents' positive experiences in aiding children with ASD in adapting routine changes?
2. What challenges do parents encounter?
3. How do parents cope and support their children?

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This chapter presents a comprehensive discussion of related literature and studies that support the present research entitled "Parents' Experiences in Aiding Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Adapting Routine Changes." The literature reviewed in this chapter provides a clearer understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the nature of routine dependence among children diagnosed with ASD, and the significance of parental involvement in facilitating smoother transitions during routine disruptions. This chapter is organized and aligned according to the Statement of the Problem of the study, specifically focusing on: (1) the parents' positive experiences, (2) the parents' challenges, and (3) how parents' experiences aid children with ASD in adapting routine changes.

Autism Spectrum Disorder is recognized as a neurodevelopmental condition that affects a child's communication, social interaction, behavior, and sensory processing. Children with ASD commonly display repetitive behaviors, limited social engagement, and difficulty understanding changes in their environment. One of the most prominent characteristics observed among children with ASD is their reliance on structured routines. Predictability provides them with a sense of security, and changes in routine may lead to emotional distress and behavioral concerns. Routine disruptions such as changes in school schedules, unexpected visitors, unfamiliar locations, altered meal times, and new daily activities often become major triggers of anxiety and resistance. Studies emphasize that children with ASD tend to become overwhelmed when they cannot anticipate what will happen next, resulting in tantrums, crying, refusal, aggression, or withdrawal. Zhang et al. (2018) explained that disruptions in routine frequently cause distress and complicate emotional regulation among children with ASD. Such findings highlight the need for consistent and structured approaches, especially within the home environment, where parents serve as the primary support system.

In addition to emotional distress, sensory processing challenges further influence the child's ability to adapt to change. Children with ASD may be hypersensitive or hyposensitive to sensory stimuli such as sound, light, textures, or crowded environments. These sensory sensitivities often worsen behavioral responses during routine changes, especially when transitions involve unfamiliar settings. Havens (n.d.) noted that discomfort in new environments often triggers anxiety and non-compliance, increasing the burden on caregivers. Therefore, routine changes do not only challenge the child but also significantly affect the emotional and psychological well-being of parents.

Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder often encounter meaningful and positive experiences while helping their children adjust to routine changes. Although the caregiving process is demanding, many parents experience fulfillment and motivation as they witness the gradual improvement of their child's behavior, adaptability, and independence. One of the most significant positive experiences reported by parents is the development of independence in their children's daily routines. When parents implement consistent schedules, children begin to develop familiarity with everyday tasks such as bathing, eating, dressing, and attending school. Over time, this predictability strengthens the child's ability to complete tasks with less assistance, promoting self-reliance. The summary of findings from the study emphasizes that organized routines reduce anxiety, promote independence, and improve emotional stability in children

with ASD. Parents observed that structured routines help lessen tantrums and improve emotional control, leading to more peaceful family interactions.

Another positive experience highlighted by parents is the effectiveness of verbal instructions and modeling. Parents frequently described that providing clear instructions and demonstrating tasks allowed their children to understand what is expected of them. When parents show the steps involved in an activity, children are more likely to follow directions and adapt to the change. This aligns with the findings of Aldred et al. (2017), who stated that parental anticipatory guidance and consistent demonstration of routines serve as critical coping mechanisms for children with ASD. As children become more familiar with routines, parents also experience improved communication with their child. Parents reported that routine-based interaction improves parent-child connection because children become more responsive when the environment is structured and predictable.

In addition, parents often experience positive behavioral changes in their children. Structured routines and consistency reduce emotional outbursts, resulting in calmer behavior. Children show improved compliance and better emotional regulation when they know what to expect. Parents view these changes as evidence of progress, strengthening their sense of hope and determination. Parental fulfillment is another major positive outcome. Parents expressed happiness and pride whenever their children show improvements in their ability to adjust. Such experiences increase parental confidence and reinforce the belief that their efforts contribute to the child's development. The literature supports that parental involvement is essential for strengthening the child's adaptive behavior and emotional stability. Parents develop resilience and optimism as they see their children gradually overcome routine-related challenges.

Despite the positive experiences, parents face various challenges in supporting children with ASD during routine changes. A major difficulty involves children's initial resistance and emotional outbursts. Parents often reported that when routines are disrupted, their children respond with tantrums, crying, shouting, aggression, and refusal. These reactions are common among children with ASD because they struggle to process unexpected transitions. The research question findings revealed that children frequently become distressed when faced with new routines, and this aligns with Zhang et al. (2018), who emphasized that routine disruption triggers anxiety and behavioral instability. Such emotional responses create stress for parents who must manage the child's behavior while maintaining patience and calmness.

Another challenge is the slow or delayed adaptation period. Parents described that children may require weeks or months to adjust to a new routine. This adjustment process requires repetition, constant reminders, and consistent reinforcement. The National Autistic Society (2020) explained that children with ASD need structured predictability, and repeated exposure to routine changes helps them gradually develop tolerance. However, the extended adaptation period becomes exhausting for parents, especially when progress is slow. Parents may experience frustration when children regress or forget learned behaviors, requiring them to restart the process.

Behavioral challenges become more intense when children are exposed to unfamiliar settings. Parents reported that children display fear, avoidance, and refusal when brought to new environments such as schools, clinics, or crowded areas. This is associated with sensory sensitivities, which may cause discomfort and overwhelm. Havens (n.d.) noted that unfamiliar environments often intensify anxiety and non-compliance, making transitions difficult for both the child and caregiver. Parents also identified communication barriers as a major challenge. Children who are non-verbal or have limited expressive language struggle to communicate their discomfort, making it difficult for parents to interpret their needs. O'Nions et al. (2017) explained that difficulties in articulating emotions complicate transitions, as parents must rely on observation and trial-and-error approaches.

Furthermore, parents experience emotional strain and psychological stress. The responsibility of supporting a child with ASD often results in fatigue, anxiety, and reduced time for self-care. Centre (2024) highlighted that parents experience elevated stress and emotional exhaustion due to constant caregiving demands. Parents may also struggle with balancing the needs of other family members, including spouses and siblings. Roxas et al. (2022) emphasized that caregiving responsibilities often affect family dynamics, leading to reduced family cohesion and increased emotional burden. These challenges demonstrate that parents require strong support systems and coping resources to sustain their caregiving role.

Parents' experiences significantly contribute to the development of strategies that help children with ASD adapt to routine changes. Over time, parents learn effective coping mechanisms that reduce distress and promote smoother transitions. One of the most effective strategies is the gradual introduction of change. Parents emphasized that sudden changes often

lead to resistance, while gradual transitions allow children to process and accept new routines. This approach reduces anxiety and prevents overwhelming emotional responses. The literature supports that gradual transitions help minimize distress by providing children time to adjust to new expectations. National Autistic Society (2020) further emphasized that structured and predictable environments contribute to reduced anxiety among children with ASD.

Positive reinforcement is another commonly applied strategy. Parents reported using rewards such as toys, food, or praise whenever their child successfully adapts to a change. This encourages cooperation and strengthens positive behavior. Dunlap et al. (2019) explained that reinforcement is widely supported in ASD interventions because it motivates children to accept new routines. Parents also employ visual schedules and social stories. Visual supports provide children with a clear understanding of what activities will happen next, while social stories help them anticipate unfamiliar situations. Smith et al. (2021) and Harris and Gisel (2022) found that visual supports and social stories reduce anxiety and improve emotional regulation among children with ASD. These tools help children understand transitions, making routine changes less stressful.

Therapy and professional guidance also play an important role. Parents indicated that therapy sessions and expert recommendations help them understand their child's needs and apply effective strategies. Dunlap et al. (2019) emphasized that well-informed parents are better equipped to implement interventions that support routine adaptation. Additionally, parents highlighted the importance of emotional reassurance and patience. By providing comfort, calm communication, and understanding, parents help children feel secure during transitions. Respecting the child's pace and readiness is also critical. Parents explained that children adjust more effectively when they are allowed to transition at their own comfort level. This aligns with Papadopoulos (2021), who emphasized the need for flexibility in interventions tailored to each child's needs.

Moreover, parents apply environmental structuring to reduce sensory triggers. Creating organized spaces and predictable surroundings helps children feel safe and reduces behavioral breakdowns. Filipino parents also benefit from community and extended family support, which reduces stress and provides assistance during routine changes. Garcia and Mendoza (2021) and Dela Cruz et al. (2023) emphasized that culturally embedded support networks strengthen parental resilience and improve caregiving effectiveness.

## **SYNTHESIS OF THE REVIEW**

The reviewed literature demonstrates that children with ASD strongly rely on structured routines and often experience distress when routines are disrupted. Parents play a vital role in managing these disruptions by providing consistent schedules, clear communication, and supportive strategies. Parents' positive experiences include witnessing improved independence, emotional stability, and communication in their children. However, challenges remain, including tantrums, slow adaptation, sensory sensitivities, communication difficulties, and parental emotional strain. Despite these difficulties, parents develop coping mechanisms such as gradual transitions, reinforcement strategies, visual supports, professional guidance, and environmental modifications. These strategies aid children with ASD in adapting to routine changes and contribute to their overall development. The literature supports the importance of family-centered programs and culturally appropriate interventions to empower parents and strengthen their role in supporting children with ASD.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a qualitative research design with a narrative approach. Participants included parents of children diagnosed with ASD aged 6–12 years from selected areas in Zamboanga City. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns in parental experiences.

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## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the results gathered from the semi-structured interviews conducted with parents of children aged 6–12 diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Baliwasan, Labuan, and Tetuan, Zamboanga City. The findings are analyzed through narrative analysis and organized according to the Statement of the Problem. This chapter highlights

parents' positive experiences, challenges, and coping strategies in aiding their children with ASD in adapting routine changes. The themes presented in this chapter emerged from the parents' narratives and reflect common experiences across participants.

### **Research Question 1: What are the parents' positive experiences in aiding children with ASD in adapting routine changes?**

The findings revealed that parents encountered several positive experiences while helping their children adjust to routine changes. One major theme that emerged is the development of independence in daily routines. Parents explained that structured routines helped children become more capable of performing daily tasks such as bathing, eating, dressing, and preparing for school. Consistency provided children with a sense of familiarity, reducing anxiety and promoting self-reliance. Parents observed that as children became accustomed to the routine, they required less assistance and displayed improved confidence in completing tasks.

Another significant theme is the improvement of parent-child communication. Parents shared that consistent routines encouraged children to become more responsive to instructions and more willing to express themselves. Some children showed progress in verbal communication, while others improved in their ability to express needs through gestures or behavior. Parents noted that routine-based interaction strengthened the parent-child relationship because children became more cooperative and less anxious.

Positive behavioral changes were also identified as a common experience. Parents stated that routine stability reduced tantrums and emotional outbursts. Children became calmer and more emotionally stable when routines were predictable. Parents expressed that they felt relieved when their children showed improved emotional regulation. In addition, parents experienced fulfillment and motivation. Witnessing their child's progress gave them a sense of achievement and strengthened their commitment to caregiving. Parents emphasized that their patience and consistent involvement contributed to these improvements.

### **Research Question 2: What are the parents' challenges in aiding children with ASD in adapting routine changes?**

The findings revealed that parents faced various challenges while assisting their children with ASD during routine changes. One major challenge is the child's initial resistance and emotional outbursts. Parents reported that children often react negatively when routines are disrupted. Emotional reactions such as tantrums, crying, shouting, and refusal were common. Parents explained that these behaviors often occur because children struggle to understand why changes are necessary.

Slow or delayed adaptation was another major challenge. Parents shared that children require long periods, sometimes weeks or months, to adjust to a new routine. This extended adjustment period requires constant repetition and patience, which becomes exhausting for parents. Parents also observed that children may regress and return to previous behaviors, requiring parents to restart training and reinforcement.

Behavioral difficulties in unfamiliar environments were also reported. Parents explained that children become more resistant when brought to new places such as schools, clinics, or crowded public spaces. These unfamiliar settings often trigger fear and anxiety. Parents also highlighted communication barriers, especially among non-verbal children. Limited communication made it difficult for parents to understand what their child was feeling and how to comfort them.

Parental emotional strain was also identified as a major challenge. Parents described experiencing stress, exhaustion, and frustration due to constant caregiving responsibilities. They also struggled with balancing family needs, as they had to prioritize their child with ASD over other family members.

### **Research Question 3: How do parents' experiences aid children with ASD in adapting routine changes?**

The findings revealed that parents developed effective strategies to help their children cope with routine changes. Gradual transitions were identified as a key coping strategy. Parents explained that introducing changes slowly helped reduce anxiety and resistance. Instead of sudden disruptions, parents prepared their children in advance and introduced changes step-by-step.

Positive reinforcement was also commonly used. Parents shared that they used rewards such as toys, food, and praise to encourage children when they successfully adapted. This helped motivate children to cooperate and accept changes. Parents also reported using visual schedules and social stories. These tools provided children with a clearer understanding of what to expect, reducing confusion and behavioral outbursts.

Therapy and professional guidance were also essential. Parents mentioned that therapy sessions and expert advice helped them learn strategies that improved their child's coping skills. Emotional support and patience were also emphasized. Parents explained that calm reassurance helped children feel secure during transitions. Environmental structuring was another strategy, as parents organized the home environment to reduce sensory triggers and maintain predictability.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter presents the summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations based on the results of the study. The findings are presented according to the Statement of the Problem.

#### **Summary Of Findings**

For the first research question, parents reported positive experiences such as improved independence in daily routines, better emotional regulation, reduced tantrums, improved communication, and parental fulfillment. Parents observed that structured routines and gradual adjustments helped children become more adaptable and emotionally stable.

For the second research question, parents identified challenges such as emotional outbursts, resistance to change, slow adaptation, behavioral difficulties in unfamiliar settings, communication barriers, and emotional strain. Parents emphasized that these challenges required patience and consistent repetition.

For the third research question, parents shared coping strategies such as gradual transitions, positive reinforcement, use of visual schedules and social stories, therapy integration, environmental structuring, emotional reassurance, and respecting the child's pace. These strategies helped reduce anxiety and improved the child's ability to adapt.

#### **Conclusions**

The study concludes that structured routines and gradual changes significantly promote children's independence and emotional stability. Parents experience fulfillment when they observe progress. However, parents face significant challenges including tantrums, slow adaptation, communication difficulties, and emotional stress. Despite these challenges, parents develop effective strategies such as reinforcement, visual tools, and professional guidance to support their children in adapting to routine changes.

#### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that schools and teachers provide consistent routines and prepare children with ASD for schedule changes. Parents should continue applying gradual transitions, reinforcement, and visual supports. Government and health institutions should provide accessible therapy services and parent training programs. Future researchers may explore wider communities and larger participant groups to expand findings.

It is recommended to provide parent training programs, strengthen support systems, and encourage the use of structured routines and visual aids. Further research is also encouraged to explore more effective strategies for supporting children with ASD.

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