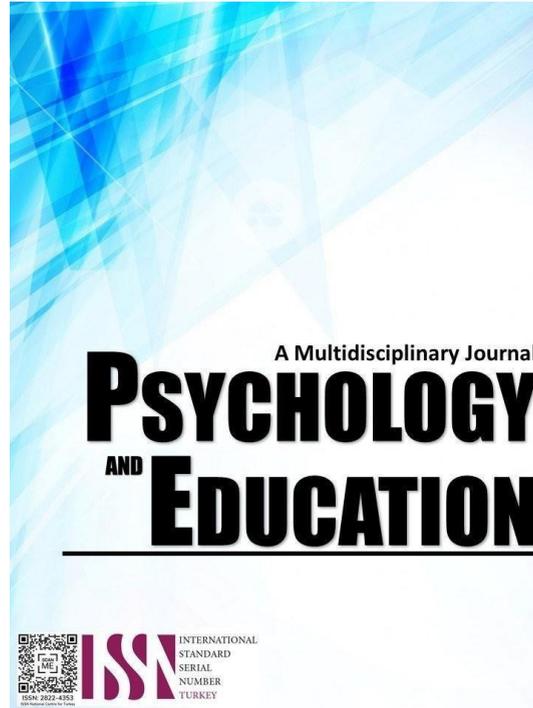


CHALLENGES OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE NEW NORMAL



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Challenges of Parents of Children with Special Needs in the New Normal

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Abstract

The study focused on the challenges, coping strategies and significant insights of parents of children with special needs during the pandemic. The study utilized a qualitative research method and phenomenological approach. Snowball sampling technique was used to reach out the six (6) female parents of children with special needs residing in General Santos City. Using thematic analysis, the result of the study shows that the parents of children with special needs experienced different challenges during the pandemic. The parents experienced increased in caregiving responsibilities towards their children, difficulty with limited to no virtual learning, social isolation and financial strain. Moreover, building a support network, creating a structured activities and routine for their children, as well as optimism and acceptance were the coping strategies used by the parents in facing their challenges during the pandemic. Also, the significant insights of the parents during the pandemic were realizing the importance of acceptance and flexibility and the need for community, as well as patience and understanding. Determining the challenges, coping strategies and insights of the parents of children with special needs will be beneficial for themselves and to other parents as well in order to develop effective parenting strategies towards their children.

Keywords: *parents, children with special needs, challenges, coping strategies, significant insights, phenomenology, Philippines*

Introduction

As the world shifts into this thing called the "new normal," different challenges are faced by people from different walks of life. The changes in our world are evidently affecting not just a country's economic status but also many individuals' mental wellness (Javed et al., 2020). The United Nations Human Rights raised their worry that while the crisis has halted the enrolment of learners in education, persons with disabilities, including children with autism, are disproportionately impacted due to social and environmental changes that are cloned in the pandemic reaction (Cahapay, 2020). This present crisis also brings threat in an increased risk of significant parental distress (Fegert et al., 2020).

On a more particular note, dealing with this modification in our environment is a noticeably stressful experience for parents who should weigh their personal lives, jobs, and raising children (Spinelli et al., 2020). During the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 40% of parents with children aged 12 years old and below belong to the extreme distress group and have experienced difficulties in dealing with their work tasks and childcare (Imran et al., 2020). The measures to decrease the spread of the viral outbreak in every community strike most families and raise various concerns. In one survey, parents of children with special needs and disabilities were questioned about their experiences with the new learning modality during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey showed that most parents were discontented with the available resources and support they had obtained for their children's educational and psychological needs (Greenway & Eaton Thomas, 2020).

Besides, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research revealed the impact of parenting stress on parent, family, and child functioning in ASD (Ooi et al., 2016; Schwartzman et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2018). Given this, pre-existing parental stress may be worsened by the well-documented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on family life (Brown et al., 2020; Daks et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020), which likely influences parent perceptions of their stress and that of their child (Brown et al., 2020; Daks et al., 2020). This emphasizes the necessity of comprehending parents' experiences during the epidemic and potential modifications in their perspectives of self and others in this sensitive population.

A study conducted in Saudi Arabia on 150 parents revealed that 94% of the parents said that the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental wellness, and 78.7% said that their stress levels had increased (Alhuzimi, 2021). Cases like these extend the call for support coming from the government in assisting parents of children with special needs, especially during these challenging times. One study also conducted in the same place shared that parents' anxiety levels during the said catastrophe were seriously higher compared to the normal situation

(Althiabi, 2021). Another study by Manning et al. (2020) on 471 parents showed that 54.5% of the parents expressed their worries about their child being at home most of the time, 52.1% stated that they were afraid that they might transmit the disease to their children, and 30.7% mentioned that they had experienced economic difficulties leading to stress.

Parents of children with special needs are more likely to have personal challenges, which could include their work being done at home, unemployment, and becoming overwhelmed with the responsibility of looking after their children without the day-to-day structured support of a therapist (Eshraghi et al., 2020). The pandemic affected many sectors of society, including therapy and education, where many clients discontinued their sessions. The implemented measures for physical distancing and the like have had a remarkable impact on the people, and reduced trust in societal institutions was related to increased mental health problems (Tilburg et al., 2020).

One population that was affected by these changes is parents of children with special needs and their battle in providing learning and therapy for them. Several parents shared their concerns about the lengthy impact of this pandemic on their children's development, given the stoppage of services, social engagements, and education and therapy (Neece et al., 2020). Also, the instability in the economy is detrimental to the well-being of parents. Joblessness and economic hardship have both short- and long-term effects on parents' physical and mental state, which can have a deliberating impact on children (Golberstein et al., 2019).

Also, the effects of the pandemic on mental health are extensive, and early reports indicate that the quarantine measure implemented has a considerable negative psychological impact (Brooks et al., 2020; Fegert et al., 2020). Early in the pandemic, it was hypothesized that the pandemic's impact on mental health would be particularly severe for people with autism and their families (Pellicano & Stears, 2020) and that anxiety might be linked to poorer psychological well-being, particularly among mothers of children with autism (Ersoy et al., 2020). Environmental changes were also likely to be substantial causes of stress for people with ASD and their families, influencing how they cope with pandemic-related stress (Ameis et al., 2020). Also, roughly 94 percent of families of people with ASD have experienced more significant difficulties because of the pandemic, including difficulties managing everyday activities and increased behavioral issues (Colizzi et al., 2020).

Additionally, a study conducted by Asbury et al. (2020) on 241 parents with children with special needs shows that due to the quick societal changes that have taken place, parents and children seem to feel a sense of loss, fear, and changes in mood and behavior. Also, caregivers of children and adults with intellectual disabilities reported much more significant mental health difficulties than carers of children and adults without intellectual disabilities (Willner et al., 2020). Parents with pre-existing mental health concerns, dysfunctional families, and households with members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, or depression are all particularly vulnerable in these scenarios (Riegler et al., 2020).

A study also conducted by Conti et al. (2020) revealed that parents and caregivers of ASD children are more vulnerable to declined family solidarity, anxiety, depression, and some complaints that bring severe burnout than caregivers of children with other disabilities. In addition, one problem that is widely faced globally is the readiness of home education. Children have less interest in the new learning system, so they are less able to be efficient in their synchronous and asynchronous activities (Churiyah et al., 2020).

Also, one study found that parenting distress relates to having children with an intellectual disability. Thus, it is essential to pay attention to the parents' mental health, lay out more family and social support, and help in decreasing parenting pressures (Ren, 2020). Concomitantly, families were also faced with extra stressors, including fear of being infected, avoidance of being quarantined, financial worries, and stigma (Eapen et al., 2020). Disrupting the daily routine of children with neurodevelopmental disabilities creates a more significant problem. Therefore, unforeseen alterations in routine may result in increased anxiety and emotional breakdowns, particularly for ASD children (Kawabe et al., 2020; Kong, 2020).

Many parents also expressed their children's therapy as positive and helpful, but they also perceived barriers and challenges when accessing therapy during this pandemic (Chu, 2020). Also, the pandemic breeds a variety of challenges for 93.9% of families, which includes heightened difficulties in directing daily activities, leisure time, and structured activities for children with remarkably intense and recurring behavior problems (Colizzi et al., 2020). Self-isolation and home quarantines, as with the closure of daycare establishments, are expected to harm clinical outcomes, with a risk of heightened symptoms and even deterioration. Delayed progress in developing

social skills is one effect of staying at home, but it also minimizes confidence and self-reliance (Chaturvedi, 2020).

In line with the quarantine and lockdown due to the pandemic, there were also developing countries which have extra issues with poor internet connectivity, and some families were in short supply of gadgets as therapies and consultations were conducted online (Mishra & Vij, 2020). Parents have claimed that regular assessments are essential to provide support for families and to proceed with continuity of care during a pandemic (Cacciopo, 2020). Also, parents were more likely to be concerned about the impact of the loss of formation and routine for their child with SEN (special education needs). Also, parents of children with SEN are expected to have more health issues because of the pandemic (Dukes et al., 2021). The mental aspect of the parents and caregivers should also need to be explored to receive acknowledgment. The maximum level of unrecognized mental health needs among parents and caregivers of children with special needs represents a risk to themselves and their dependents (Willner et al., 2020).

A study conducted in the Philippines by Cahapay (2020) on five (5) parents with children with ASD found that changes in the child's routine due to the pandemic, such as struggle with what activities they will give. Also, parents were involved in the child's learning and development due to limited social interaction brought about by the pandemic. Also, a report stated that a Filipino parent with ASD lost a job due to the pandemic, and the child struggles with the learning conducted virtually (Antonio, 2021).

With the different struggles and challenges the parents have experienced during the pandemic, they have used various coping strategies to face them. Using coping mechanisms is one of the ways that mothers try to remain firm under challenging circumstances. A coping response is when a person responds right away when faced with a complex scenario. A variety of things influenced each person's ability to cope. When people are liberated from their stressful surroundings and have positive experiences with themselves, this is known as positive coping. Social support from the nearest and dearest assisted mothers in coping well (Pepprell et al., 2018).

A study by Martinsone and Tzivian (2021) revealed that parents of children with special needs mentioned various coping mechanisms they employ to cope with the pandemic's stress. Maintaining a daily routine, physical activity such as playing sports, working in the

garden, taking walks in the fresh air, time with family such as having conversations or games, and time for oneself are all important.

Also, collective coping experiences may foster resilience and indicate potential for future care that is more flexible and effective. Resilience is a process of interactive adaptation that helps people cope with adversity and is linked to a person's neurological and psychological composition (Feder et al., 2019) and socio-ecological circumstances (Ungar, 2015). Social support, coping style (e.g., problem-focused coping), cognitive evaluation, optimism, locus of control, self-efficacy, acceptance, the feeling of coherence, and positive family function have all been linked to resilience in autistic families in the past (Iacob et al., 2020; Bekhet et al., 2012).

Moreover, parents use various strategies and coping mechanisms to manage the stress brought on by children with special needs. Numerous child and parental characteristics, including socioeconomic position, education, family size, and support system, influence the choice and implementation of coping mechanisms. Child factors include diagnosis, age, gender, and degree of functioning. Every household has its own set of stress management techniques. Due to their varied personalities and traits, not all parenting techniques are effective for all parents. Mothers play the most significant role in managing such children because they are the primary caregivers and spend more time with the child (Arif et al., 2021).

To assist parents having difficulty caring for their children with special needs, a study suggests that mindfulness and acceptance clinical strategies, which can be learned at home, correspond with reduced psychological distress for parents and caregivers of children with special needs (Jones et al., 2018). Cultivating a parent support system was also considered an essential assistance for parents of children with special needs. This includes reciprocally active virtual training sessions. Parents were also asked for feedback to provide better programs specific to each child and family (McDevitt, 2021). Also, a study by Parenteau et al. (2020) discovered that throughout the pandemic, parents used various coping strategies, which included exercising at home, engaging in yoga and meditation, reading newspapers, preparing meals, communicating with loved ones online, and passing the time such as bathing, grooming their nails, and shopping online. Also, when there was more than one adult at home who could care for the child with ASD, parents gave each other rest periods (Mutluer et al., 2020).



Also, this study utilized Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping as the theoretical lens for knowing the challenges and coping strategies faced by parents of children with special needs in this new normal. Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping states that people continually evaluate stimuli in their surroundings. When stimuli are perceived as threatening, challenging, or hurtful (i.e., stressors), the resulting distress triggers coping techniques to manage emotions or attempts to treat the stressor itself directly. Coping mechanisms shift the person-environment relationship, which can be rated as favorable, unfavorable, or unresolved. Positive emotions are elicited by pleasant resolves of stressors, whereas distress is elicited by unresolved or negative resolutions, prompting the individual to pursue more coping strategies to settle the stressor (Biggs et al., 2017).

Moreover, the presence of a parent or a guardian plays a crucial role in addressing the demands of their children with special needs. Experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic leaves a remarkable struggle that impacts the mental health of these parents. With the limited literature and studies about their challenges in the Philippines, specifically in General Santos City, the researcher sought to determine the challenges faced by the parents of children with special needs during the pandemic, the coping strategies of parents of children with special needs amidst pandemic and the significant insights that the parents have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also, the primary purpose of this study is to know the challenges faced by parents with special needs children and to help a lot of the population. This study is beneficial for parents with special needs children since they are the focus of this study. The study will assist parents with special needs children in realizing other parents' circumstances and developing parenting strategies for their children. This study will contribute to advancing knowledge for mental health professionals, psychologists, psychometricians, guidance counselors, psychiatrists, and child therapists. This study will enrich the knowledge of our facilitators of learning in delivering real-life scenarios in respective classes. This study will offer additional knowledge for psychology majors, especially in the educational, guidance, and clinical settings. Lastly, this study will contribute to the knowledge needed by SPED programs in the country.

Lastly, this phenomenological study is limited to determining the parents of children with special needs

challenges, their coping strategies, and significant insights during the pandemic. The six (6) female parents were 18 years old and above, residing in General Santos City. Three (3) participants were interviewed face-to-face, and three (3) were interviewed online. For the face-to-face interview, the study was conducted in General Santos City. For the online interview, it was done via Zoom application. Using thematic analysis, the researcher analyses the data collected from the participants' responses.

Methodology

This portion of the study contains a general explanation of the study participants, materials and instruments, design, and procedure necessary to make this study significant, valid, and reliable.

Study Participants

For the participants of the study and inclusion criteria, using the snowball sampling technique, the study participants were six (6) female parents of children with special needs, specifically children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder undergoing therapy. The participants were 18 years old and above, resided in General Santos City for at least one year, and belonged to a support group of parents of children with special needs. Also, the study conducted both face-to-face interviews and online interviews. Three (3) participants were interviewed face-to-face, and three (3) were interviewed online. For the face-to-face interview, the study was conducted in General Santos City. For the online interview, it was done via Zoom application. Also, the researcher let the participants choose what set-up they would like the interview to be done, which was either face-to-face or online. Some of the participants chose online due to the risk of the virus and for their convenience and availability.

Furthermore, to support the researcher's target range, Creswell (1998) suggested that participants range between 5 to 25 in a phenomenological study. Morse (1994) also suggested that a minimum of 6 participants can be utilized in a phenomenological study. For exclusion criteria, the parents should not be residing outside General Santos City, and their children should not be diagnosed with different disorders other than Autism Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. For withdrawal criteria, the

participants of the study have the freedom to choose whether to participate or not willingly, and rejecting to participate in this study does not have any sanctions.

Materials and Instruments

The researcher used an in-depth interview (IDI) to gather the necessary data for this study. The IDI was guided by an interview guide, which five (5) experts validated. The interview guide was utilized to determine the parents' challenges, coping strategies, and significant insights during the pandemic. Also, using the recorded audio tape from the participants' responses, the researcher transcribed the data collected and then analyzed it using thematic analysis. In addition, the interview guide prepared by the researcher was validated by five (5) experts who were Ph.D. holders. The interview guide garnered an average rating of 9.2 with a description of very good, which indicates that it is valid.

Design and Procedure

This study utilized a qualitative-phenomenological research method to determine the parents with children with special needs challenges, coping mechanisms, and significant insights during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research is defined as investigating and determining the nature of a particular phenomenon (Busetto et al., 2020). A phenomenological approach was used since the researcher wanted to determine a phenomenon experienced by parents with children with special needs.

Moreover, the researcher formulated an interview guide that was reviewed and validated by five (5) experts. Then, the researcher seeks approval from the University of Mindanao Ethics Review Committee (UMERC) to conduct the study. After approval, the researcher gathered the information needed in this study around the first week of June 2022 and ended around the last week of June 2022. The researcher then sent a letter to a support group where members were parents of children with special needs in General Santos City. The researcher also sent a letter to conduct a study to various leaders of support groups in General Santos City for the referral since the study's sampling technique is snowball sampling.

After the participants were referred to the researcher, informed consent was given to them to participate in the study. After the participants had confirmed their permission to be part of the study, a brief explanation of the study's objectives was discussed. Also, the

researcher coordinated with a registered psychometrician to brief and debrief the participants and the researcher. Then, the researcher interviewed the participants' challenges, coping strategies, and significant insights that they learned during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the problem statement.

After the data were gathered, the recorded audio tapes were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. As part of the protocol, the researcher collaborated with a university data analyst who is an expert on thematic analysis to ensure reliability and validity. Besides, finding patterns or themes in qualitative data is a process known as thematic analysis. Thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006) includes six (6) phase frameworks for doing a thematic analysis. The first step is (1) become familiar with the data, then (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, then (4) review themes, (5) define themes, and lastly (6) write up reports (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Furthermore, since the research can put participants at risk, the researcher must ensure their safety is preserved throughout the research process (Polit & Beck, 2010; Munhall, 2012). Protecting participants' well-being entails adhering to standard ethical norms such as respect for the participants' autonomy, protection from harm, confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary involvement (Scott, 2013).

In addition, research techniques help scholars build trustworthiness in their study areas and reports. Lincoln and Guba (1985) rely on four general standards for the methodology of trustworthiness in qualitative research. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were the main requirements. Credibility measures the legitimacy of the qualitative study, especially the results, through various verification methods. Dependability and researchers' expectations for peer review are linked concepts. Effective communication techniques that increase trust include peer assessment and peer debriefing. Also, the confirmability of qualitative data is ensured when data are rigorously examined throughout data collection and processing. This increases the likelihood that other researchers will repeat the results. Since generalizability is not sought in qualitative research, the transferability of qualitative data assures that the study findings are transferrable to comparable situations or people. Transferability can be demonstrated by making explicit assumptions and contextual inferences about the research site and participants (Stahl & King, 2020; Northcentral University, 2023).



In this study, the researcher ensured that the research ethics applied by U MERC were strictly observed and followed. Also, the researcher ensured that the six (6) participants who were parents of children with special needs, specifically children with ASD or ADHD undergoing therapy, ages 18 years old and above, residing in General Santos City, and belonged to a support group, are treated with respect while also ensuring that all study-related information, including potential risks and benefits, are fully disclosed. The researcher ensured that the parents have anonymity and the autonomous right to self-determination, as well as the freedom to choose whether to participate in research studies willingly, and there are no sanctions if they reject to participate in this study. The researcher also used pseudonyms in this study. In addition, all the means of recording participants' data were kept confidential and used correctly. They were destroyed after being used to keep the participants and researcher confidentiality. Also, the researcher followed the Data Privacy Law to protect the participants' data.

The researcher guaranteed that before the interview started, informed consent from the participants was secured and guaranteed the parents of children with special needs, specifically children with ASD or ADHD undergoing therapy, aged 18 years old and above, residing in General Santos City and belonged to a support group were the only participants of the study.

The researcher ensured the participants were not harmed during or after the research. Since the researcher conducted the study during the pandemic, to minimize the risk of acquiring COVID-19, the researcher strictly followed the minimum health protocol set and mandated by the Department of Health (DOH) and IATF. Also, as a form of gratitude, the researcher gave a token of appreciation to the participants for being part of the study. Additionally, to avoid plagiarism, the researcher rephrased the sentences and phrases in this study. The researcher gave proper credit and citations to the ideas and literature being used in this study. The researcher also used the university's anti-plagiarism software, Turnitin, to check for plagiarized areas in this study.

The researcher also guaranteed no changes or alteration of the results or data and ensured no fraud in the data gathered from the interview. At the same time, the researcher did not start the interview without a referral from the support group of parents of children with special needs in General Santos City. Furthermore, the researcher followed institutional requirements for identifying, disclosing, and handling conflicts of interest. The researcher ensured no conflict

of interest could affect the study results as the parents' welfare was always prioritized. Also, to avoid deception in this study, the researcher saw that the participants were not misled or misinformed about the purpose of the study since their protection was the utmost concern. Lastly, the technology issues and concerns were observed. Lastly, all measures in this research strictly followed the process supervised by the U MERC to ensure that the researcher has followed the protocols, which is evident in the Certificate of Approval with a U MERC Protocol No. U MERC- 2022 - 148.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Themes on the challenges faced by the parents of children with special need during the COVID-19 pandemic

Themes	Core Ideas
Increased Caregiving Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra care to the child due to pandemic • Lone caregiver of the child • Teaching life skills during pandemic • Extend the patience as much as possible
Difficulty with Limited to no Virtual Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge on how to continue the therapy • Adjustment problems due to virtual set-up • Limited learning from the therapist • Child watches television whole day
Social Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boredom due to social limitation • Limited social interaction • Child's limited social engagement • Impacted the socialization
Financial Strain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saved money for the child's therapy since it is costly • Experienced financial challenges • Struggle to continue the therapy due to financial reasons. • Experienced cessation of therapy due to financial problems.

Table 1 above presents the themes and the core ideas gathered from the participants' responses when asked about the challenges they have encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. These participants were parents of children with special needs, specifically with ASD and ADHD. The participants recalled the struggles and challenges they have experienced as parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their responses drew the four

(4) themes: *Increased Caregiving Responsibilities, Difficulty with Limited to no Virtual Learning, Social Isolation, Financial Strain.*

Increased Caregiving Responsibilities

Taking care of children with special needs requires special attention and care, which means that during the pandemic, parents need to exert an extra amount of time and effort in addressing the additional needs of their children. The increase in responsibilities of the parents means dedicating an extra amount of time and effort to addressing the usual additional needs of their children and looking after their safety needs amidst the different risks and challenges of the pandemic.

Participant 5 (Ellaine) shared that her child needed to be monitored during the pandemic since he was stuck in their house.

During the pandemic, he needs to be watched because he is only at home; there is no therapy physically.

Participant 3 (Juvy) also mentioned that the pandemic posed a significant risk to her child's safety since she was the only one taking care of him.

I am the only one taking care of him. Especially my child; I am worried that he might get COVID-19. What will happen if I get COVID-19? Why a child will be left alone

Difficulty with Limited to no Virtual Learning

Due to the risk brought by the pandemic, therapy and learning were all shifted into the virtual setting. This creates another challenge for the parents of children with special needs in assisting their children through online platforms. Virtual learning becomes a difficulty and challenge to the parents since it is not accessible for everyone, and their children's attention span interferes with this situation.

Participant 5 (Ellaine) specifically shared the challenge of continuing her child's therapy since physical contact is limited due to the pandemic.

The number one challenge during the pandemic is how to continue the therapy because the clinics were unavailable physically. So, during the pandemic, he had his therapist online. He was having his therapy online for one hour. My child also has defiant behavior, and he will say, "It's so boring," and I will tell him, "No, it's needed."

Participant 2 (Janica) also shared the struggles during the pandemic since the therapy was conducted

virtually.

My child has difficulties adjusting during the pandemic. The therapy is different since it is done virtually. You will just say, "You jump." There is no physical interaction even though the caregiver is present.

Social Isolation

Socialization is considered a significant intervention for these children, which is essential for their developmental skills. However, the stay-at-home policies brought up by the pandemic cease the usual activities of their children, including their chances to interact with other children and integrate meaningful relationships along the process. These circumstances create boredom for the children and bring out a tendency for them to become uninterested in patterned daily activities. Since the children had limited social interaction, addressing these was one of the challenges parents experienced during the pandemic.

Participant 1 (Emily) specifically expressed that her child experienced boredom due to the pandemic.

I think he experienced boredom at home since he could not go out. Sometimes, he throws tantrums, but not that much and severe. Because of that, I let him play outside the house with our neighbors and his cousins. Sometimes, we also do storytelling.

Participant 5 (Ellaine) also mentioned that she limited her social interaction during the pandemic since she was exposed.

During the pandemic, I'm working; my sister-in-law is a nurse, and we are exposed. We limit my social interaction, so that's the change we made; we do not go to the mall more often.

Financial Strain

One remarkable effect of the pandemic is the heightened economic consequences for the parents. It becomes a challenge for the parents to provide resources deemed fit for virtual learning and other educational material to assist their children at home. Parents strive to provide the best available interventions for their children, like education and therapy, which becomes a struggle caused by the job lockdowns and restrictions of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Participant 4 (Mercy) shared that she saved money for her child's therapy and experienced financial challenges during the pandemic.

Financial is one of my challenges; I saved enough



money before enrolling my child in the center. I said to myself that it should not be 6 months only. It should be continuous.

Participant 6 (Agnes) also mentioned the financial struggles she experienced during the pandemic. *It is hard since it is a pandemic; however, my brother helped me financially. Without my brother, we cannot sustain the therapy since it is expensive; one of my challenges is financial.*

Table 2. Themes on the coping strategies of parents of children with special need amidst COVID-19 pandemic

Themes	Core Ideas
Building a Support Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous learning from the techniques of the therapist • Labeled objects to support the child's reading • Supports the interests of the child such as riding bicycle and interaction to other child • Letting the child interact with other children with special needs.
Creating Structure and Routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letting the child do house hold chores and to enhance the life skills • Letting the child learn how to cross the road when going outside • Applying the techniques that the teacher has taught • Conditioned the child not to touch things unless allowed to
Optimism and Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hopeful that the child will be fine someday and prayers as well • Accept the reality, encourage the child to have interests in life • Child as the source of motivation, praying for his/her condition • Acceptance on the child's condition

Table 2 above shows the themes and the core ideas on the coping strategies the parents have used to face the challenges they've experienced during the pandemic. Since the parents experienced various challenges, they've used various coping strategies to help them function well and to help them deal with their children. These coping strategies were used to maintain their mental health. Three (3) themes were drawn from their responses: *Building a Support Network, Creating Structure and Routine, and Optimism and Acceptance.*

Building a Support Network

It surfaced from the participants' statements that the family should be the support network of their child and maintain this system even with the extra needs they're required to meet. Building a support network involves applying the insights taught by their child's educator at home and assisting the child to keep up with their interests, such as riding a bike or any usual play activity. Some parents experienced introducing their children to their neighbors where they can play and socialize. This form of interaction, despite the pandemic's barrier, strengthens the child's support network and teaches flexibility for the parents.

Participant 1 (Emily) shared that she applied what the teacher taught her child at home in the center. *We followed what my child's teacher had taught us: that punishment should be there if my child behaves negatively. We practiced what the teacher taught us: how to deal with our child properly, such as maintaining eye-to-eye contact and hand gripping.*

Participant 4 (Mercy) also shared that she supports her child's learning through her technique. *Because my child is a good reader, I got to a point when I decided to label things such as our cabinet and dispenser so that he will be guided. I will tell him, "This is food keeper, what's this? Food keeper. This is a dispenser."*

Creating Structure and Routine

Following a patterned activity is a common construct for the children of the participants. Parents endeavored to apply the skills their children learned at home from their respective schools and centers. Establishing a form of authority while allowing their child to be autonomous is one practice these parents execute, making the created structure and routine more beneficial for their children. Despite the challenges encountered, parents continue to offer their children a consistent daily structure by applying the sufficient knowledge they need to learn and relearn.

Participant 1 (Emily) mentioned that she let her child learn how to do life skills during the pandemic. *I teach him life skills, like doing the dishes but it's not always since he is lazy sometimes. Also, I let him take a bath on his own, brush his teeth, take a poop, take his own clothes when we are not in hurry.*

Participant 3 (Juvy) also shared that she teaches his child various activities during the pandemic.



When we are playing outside our house, I teach him how to cross the road by counting one to five if there will be a car passing by. I also try him to help me mop the floor, and I also let him help me cover the bed.

Optimism and Acceptance

Parents expressed their positivity and affirmation in different perspectives. This positive outlook in life comes with the hope that their current effort and struggles will prompt a long-term positive impact on the child. For some parents, acceptance is a challenging state, but it is also the primary step in understanding their child better and the start of formulating interventions that would be beneficial for them. Embracing the reality of the child allows the parents to come up with solutions they can offer. Optimism and acceptance could be deliberating for the parents but would be easier to exhibit when guided with prayers and aspirations.

Participant 3 (Juvy) shared her child was the source of her motivation during the pandemic.

My child is my source of motivation; the hope is still there that my child will be fine. It is really hard for me. I will also do anything for my child. Through prayers as well, I also let my child pray since it is effective it helps me feel relieved

Participant 2 (Janica) also shared that parents should learn to accept their children's condition.

You should accept the reality; you have to do something for your child that will help him to have interests such as collecting, arts, music, or anything that will help him to have other interests.

Table 3 above shows the different themes and core ideas on the significant insights that the parents of children with special needs have learned during the pandemic. Parents have learned various insights during the pandemic, which helped them guide and deal with their children. Their experiences as a parent of children with special needs made them realize different lessons in life that aided them to function and live a better life. These range from accepting their children's condition and the importance of socialization well to extending their patience towards their children. From their responses, three (3) themes were drawn: *Realized the Importance of Acceptance and Flexibility, Realized the Need for Community, and Patience and Understanding.*

Table 3. Themes on the significant insights that the parents have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Themes	Core Ideas
Realized the Importance of Acceptance and Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept the condition first to address the child's condition Acknowledge the child's condition and have an accepting environment Accept that the child has special needs Learn how to accept the child's condition
Realized the Need for Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disturbance in socialization occurred during the pandemic Invite other children, regardless of age, for the socialization of the child Importance of socialization to child's development Focused to gadgets during the pandemic Therapy develops the socialization of the child
Patience and Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Longer patience and firm rules towards the child Patience on the child's condition Patience and understanding as coping mechanism Learned the importance of patience

Realized the Importance of Acceptance and Flexibility

It surfaced from the data gathered that the first step towards giving the best for children with special needs is a warm and open family. Learning to accept the situation assisted the parents to become more empathic and engaging with their children. This is possible by committing not just to their children's daily behavioral challenges but also to learning new knowledge about appropriate and efficient ways to deal with them. Parents have shared that coming up with a solution would not be possible without recognizing first the problem.

Participant 1 (Emily) emphasized the importance of acceptance to address the child's needs.

Other parents were in denial even though they knew that their child had special needs. You cannot solve the problem unless you accept it. How can you find a solution if you keep denying your child's condition?

Participant 5 (Ellaine) also shared the importance of an accepting environment towards the child's development.

One of the best practices is that all family members should understand the child's situation because if they do not understand the situation, they cannot give the best for the child.

Realized the Need for Community

Learning and interacting with other people helps the

social development of children with special needs. The parents acknowledge that socialization greatly affects their children's routines. They have raised concerns about the shift of focus of their children from person-to-person interaction to gadget-focused activity. The need for community is a realization for the parents on how social skills, managing emotions, and understanding how others feel can be achieved through socialization where this global crisis interfered. In the vast evolution of technology, parents would still agree that face-to-face interaction is more preferred by their children.

Participant 5 (Ellaine) shared that since the therapy was conducted online during the pandemic, her child's interaction with other children was limited.

Before the pandemic, my child had someone to play with, but it was affected during the pandemic. But he had his brother to play with, and sometimes his cousins would come home so he could have playmates.

Participant 2 (Janica) also expressed the importance of socialization towards her child.

We used to visit neighbors; then we invited children from our neighbors to play with my child. You will just invite other children, not necessarily that they are the same age, as long as socialization is there.

Patience and Understanding

Parents struggle to practice patience and understanding as most children have an innate lack of self-control. The time spent by the parents towards their children undoubtedly increased during the pandemic. This means additional time should be allocated to keeping an eye on their child's daily activities. On the other side, some parents learned to be accustomed to using patience when dealing with their children, like imposing rules and keeping up with their regular routines. Parents verbalized that living in a deep state of denial would just prevent them from perceiving their children in unique and challenging circumstances

Participant 3 (Juvy) emphasized the importance of patience, understanding and acceptance.

You should have more patience and be consistent with the rules you impose. You should also learn to accept the reality to help your child, because back then, I was also in denial, like my family.

Participant 4 (Mercy) also shared the same sentiments regarding the patience, understanding, and acceptance of the child's condition.

I will take a deep breath, and you should have

patience. I will say to my child, "I'm sorry, that's not nice to shout," then "I'm sorry, that's not nice, do not copy mama".

Discussion

Challenges Faced by the Parents of Children with Special Need During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Based on the results of the study, parents of children with special needs experienced different challenges during the pandemic. The challenges include increased caregiving responsibilities, limited to no virtual learning, limited social interaction, and financial challenges. Also, on the challenges experienced by the parents of children with special needs during the pandemic, four (4) themes emerged.

The study's result revealed that the parents experienced Increased Caregiving Responsibilities during the pandemic. Since caring for children with special needs involves special attention and care, parents of such children will have to devote more time and energy to meet their specific demands during the pandemic. As their responsibilities increase, parents must invest more time and effort to provide and sustain the additional needs of their children and ensure their safety as they deal with the various threats and difficulties during the pandemic.

Also, Rakap et al. (2022) stated that during the pandemic, parents of children with special needs must give their children more consistent, intensive support at home. It is anticipated that this added duty, directly tied to parental abilities, will negatively impact and make life more difficult for the family. The families of children with special needs, who already experience higher stress levels than families of typically developing children, have entered an even more stressful period, and their quality of life is likely to be negatively impacted. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused economic, health, and psychological problems for families and increased responsibilities for caring for their children.

Furthermore, the results of the study show that parents of children with special needs expressed that their children experienced Limited to No Virtual Learning during the pandemic. Therapy and education of children with special needs have all been moved into a virtual environment because of the risk posed by the pandemic. As a result, using internet platforms to help the children with special needs presented new difficulties for the parents. Not everyone can access



virtual learning and children's attention hampers it, making it a challenge for parents.

Distance learning was frequently ineffective since children needed too much adult supervision, specialized training and therapies, and had few possibilities for social connection (Sonnenschein, 2022). The change of therapeutic services to virtual delivery during pandemic mitigation efforts has placed an excessive burden on parents as many parents have been tasked with providing therapeutic interventions in the home or investing a lot of time and effort into facilitating their children's telehealth-based services (Cacioppo et al., 2020; Neece et al., 2020).

The results of the study also show that parents experienced challenges regarding Social Isolation during the pandemic. In order to help these children to develop their social abilities, socialization is seen as a major intervention. However, the lockdown prompted by the pandemic stopped the children's regular activities, including their opportunities to connect with other children and forge lasting bonds along the way. Because of these situations, children get bored easily and lose interest in routine everyday tasks. Parents expressed that their children's limited social interaction was one of their challenges during the pandemic.

Furur et al. (2022) stated that children's absence of social opportunities is a growing source of parental concerns. It is not surprising that parents of children with ASD would be concerned about the loss of social opportunities as the pandemic advanced, regardless of their child's age. Social interaction is important for developing and maintaining social and communication skills. However, social distancing measures during the pandemic may lead to social isolation, the loss of friendships, and increased boredom and loneliness (Pellicano et al., 2020).

Lastly, the results revealed that parents of children with special needs experienced Financial Strain during the pandemic. The increased financial ramifications for the parents were one striking outcome of the pandemic. Providing materials deemed appropriate for virtual learning and other educational tools that would benefit their children at home presented a difficulty for the parents. The COVID-19 outbreak's restrictions and employment lockdowns make it difficult for parents to give their kids the finest interventions, such as education and therapy.

The COVID-19 pandemic's economic effects put the health and well-being of families across the country at risk. In order to deal with the financial effects of the pandemic, parents claimed to have reduced their food

purchases, depleted their savings, and taken on debt (Karpman et al., 2020). Additionally, students with special needs need various educational and support services. Many families were forced to make difficult choices during the COVID-19 pandemic as the burden of paying for education, therapy, and healthcare fell on them. Many parents were simultaneously dealing with their financial difficulties (Epperson, 2020).

Coping Strategies of Parents of Children with Special Need Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

Based on the study's results, the parents of children with special needs utilized different coping strategies to face their challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The coping strategies include supporting the child's needs, creating various activities for the child's learning, and accepting and having a positive outlook in life. Three (3) themes emerged on the coping strategies the parents used amidst the pandemic.

The first coping strategy that the parents used during the pandemic was Building a Support Network, based on the results of the study. Family should serve as their child's support system and continue to do so despite the additional demands they must fulfill. Building a support system includes helping the child maintain their hobbies, engage in any regular play activity, and apply the lessons their child's educator gives at home. Some parents have successfully exposed their children to the neighbors so they may play and interact. This kind of engagement, despite the pandemic's barrier, enhances the child's social network and teaches flexibility to parents as well.

Love, support, and encouragement are essential for all children, but for children with special needs, such positive reinforcement can help guarantee that they grow up with a strong sense of self-worth, confidence, and the will to persevere even if they face challenges. It is not the responsibility of parents to "cure" learning disabilities; rather, they should provide their children with the social and emotional support they need to overcome obstacles. The way parents act and handle difficulties has a significant influence on their children. Thus, parents should never forget this (Kemp et al., 2023).

The results also revealed that Creating Structure and Routine helped the parents face challenges during the pandemic. For the children with special needs, following a pattern of activity is a frequent component. Also, the parents attempt to apply the skills and activities that children learn in their respective schools

and centers at home. Creating a form of authority while allowing the child to be autonomous is one practice these parents should execute, making the created structure and routine more beneficial for their children. Despite the challenges encountered, parents continue to offer their children a consistent daily structure by applying the sufficient knowledge they need to learn and re-learn

Long-term disruptions to children's daily routines may result in the loss of abilities that they may have learned while in school, as well as it may increase anxiety and lead to problematic behaviors. Additionally, parents managing job and family obligations while being unexpectedly locked at home due to the pandemic have fewer options to balance these pressures. Experts suggest parents should create and adapt a modified version of their child's usual school routine in order for them to help cope with the sudden disruption. Some activities include getting plenty of time outside and family-based social activities, including the child in household chores and asking their teachers or service providers for the tools they use at school so parents can re-create them at home (Autism Speaks, 2020).

Also, based on the results, parents of children with special needs used Optimism and Acceptance to cope with their challenges during the pandemic. Parents used many views to show their encouragement and affirmation. These optimistic outlooks on life were accompanied by the hope that the children will experience long-term benefits due to their current efforts and hardships. Although acceptance can be difficult for some parents, it is also the first step in developing a deeper understanding of their child and the beginning of developing solutions that will be helpful for them. The parents can develop solutions to present by accepting the child's reality. For the parents, optimism and acceptance might be difficult to demonstrate, but they would be simpler if prayers and ambitions supported them.

When caring for children with ASD, parents need to be accepting, patient, and tough. Losing hope in raising kids is difficult if parents accept them sincerely. Children with autism will benefit from their parents' ability to show gratitude since they will receive more respect and care. Parents know the magnitude of the gift and grace bestowed upon them, enabling them to possess excellent things. They aspire to a bright future for their kids (Lestari & Pratisti, 2019).

Significant Insights that the Parents have Learned during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Based on the study's results, parents of children with special needs have learned significant insights during the COVID-19 pandemic. The significant insights include their realization of the importance of accepting their children's condition, the importance of socialization, and being understanding and patient towards their children. On the significant insights that the parents have learned during the pandemic, three (3) themes emerged.

Based on the study's results, the parents of children with special needs Realized the Importance of Acceptance and Flexibility during the pandemic. Accepting the situation helped the parents relate to and engage with their children more deeply. This is feasible by committing to acquiring new information on suitable and effective ways to handle their children's everyday behavioral difficulties. Parents have mentioned that identifying the issue before finding a solution is essential.

The more information parents have about ASD, the better able they will be to choose what is best for their child. Parents should become knowledgeable about their alternatives for therapy, ask questions, and be involved in all treatment decisions. Additionally, parents should practice acceptance rather than focusing on how an autistic child differs from other kids and what the child "misses." They should appreciate their child's unique characteristics and rejoice in minor victories. More than anything else, they will support their child with their unwavering love and acceptance (Smith et al., 2023).

The parents also Realized the Need for Community for their children during the pandemic. Education and interpersonal interaction aid the social development of children with exceptional needs. Parents acknowledge that socialization is extremely important in their children's daily lives. They have expressed worries about their kids' concentration shifting away from interpersonal interactions and toward gadget-focused activities. The parents' knowledge of the importance of community systems from the fact that socialization—where the global crisis interfered—is the only way to help children develop social skills, emotional control, and empathy.

Some parents of autistic children felt that during the pandemic, the social development of children with ASD stagnated and even suffered a setback. Due to many pandemic-era regulations preventing social contact, children with ASD are severely disadvantaged. In this situation, the family and school must determine the best strategy for fostering an



environment that will promote the social, behavioral, and verbal development of autistic children (Muhajid, 2022).

Furthermore, based on the results of this study, Patience and Understanding were some of the significant insights the parents have learned during the pandemic. Because most of these children naturally lack self-control, parents struggle to demonstrate patience and understanding. During the pandemic, parents surely spent more time with their children. Parents should set aside more time to monitor their child's everyday activities. On the other hand, some parents habitually exercised patience when dealing with their kids, enforcing regulations and adhering to routines. According to parents, living in a deep state of denial will only keep them from seeing their children in unusual and difficult situations.

It is crucial to draw attention to the reality that some people experienced a crisis in understanding and coping with the issues brought on by the pandemic. Both parents and caregivers of children with special needs and disabilities struggle during the pandemic. Raising children with special needs at home during the lockdown requires much patience and work. These children may experience various problems due to the COVID-19 and lockdown's extreme adjustments and the stress they cause. Therefore, parents and other adults who look after these children need to be able to control and guide them during the pandemic (Vinisha et al., 2020).

Lastly, this study supports Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping. Since the parents experienced distress, struggles, and challenges during the pandemic, and in order for them to continue caring for their children, they developed various coping strategies. These coping strategies helped the parents cope with the challenges they have experienced since taking care of children with special needs requires extraordinary effort, time, and understanding. Since the pandemic put the parents in a stressful situation. In the transactional theory of stress and coping, the immediate stress reaction, long-term health, psychological well-being, and social functioning are all impacted by coping (Obbairus et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Based on the results and findings of this study, the researcher found out that the parents of children with special needs experienced different challenges during

the pandemic. These challenges include increased caregiving responsibilities, difficulty with limited to no virtual learning, social isolation, and financial strain. The parents experienced increased caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic since the face-to-face therapy and socialization outside their homes were limited. Parents also expressed that they were careful when going outside since they were exposed and their children were at risk. Parents also experienced struggle with how to continue the therapy and learning of their children virtually since it was not accessible for everyone and their children's attention span interfered with the situation. Also, parents experienced struggles on how they will deal with their children's boredom and social isolation since going outside was limited. Parents also experienced financial challenges since the pandemic affected the nation economically; they also struggled with the costs of the therapy.

However, even though the parents experienced challenges during the pandemic, they've used various coping strategies to continue their lives. The coping strategies include building a support network, creating structure and routine, and optimism and acceptance. Parents emphasized that parents should provide for and sustain the needs of their children and show their support in any way possible. Also, since the pandemic caused limitations in their children's social interaction, parents created various structured activities and routines. Even though the pandemic affected their children's learning because of the limited exposure to therapy, parents were able to create activities to address their children's boredom by engaging and letting them learn various life skills. Furthermore, the parents emphasized even though the pandemic affected them in many ways, they were still positive and hopeful about their children's future. They've also emphasized that parents should learn to accept their children's condition since it is also a way to help them.

Lastly, parents learned various insights during the pandemic. These significant insights include the importance of acceptance and flexibility, the need for community, and patience and understanding. Parents of children with special needs learned and realized the importance of accepting their children's condition since it is also a form of helping them to have a better life. Parents emphasized that to help their children, they should accept his/her condition. Also, parents learned and realized the importance of socialization for their children since the pandemic halted face-to-face therapy and limited their social engagement. They've expressed that parents should let their child engage in various social activities as taught to them by their

therapists. Parents also highlighted the importance of understanding and extending patience towards their children with special needs since it is also a form of love and support.

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