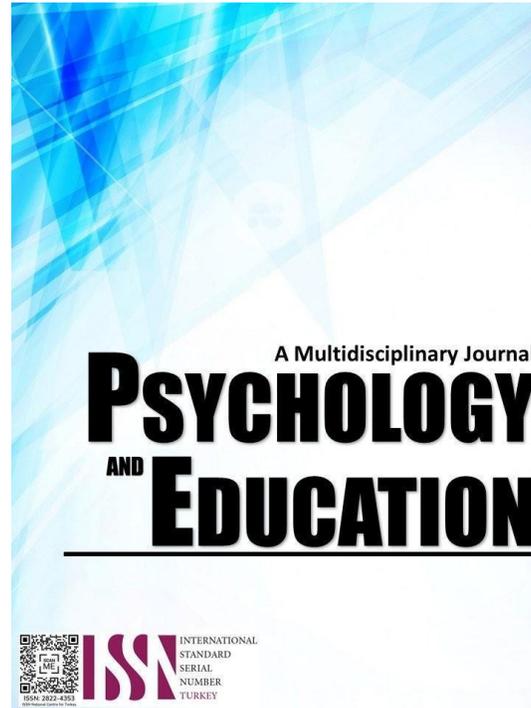


# EXPLORING FAITH AND ENDURANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS RAISING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS



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## Exploring Faith and Endurance: A Phenomenological Study on the Experiences of Parents Raising Children with Special Needs

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### Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs, focusing on the emotional, spiritual, financial, and social dimensions of their journey. Using Colaizzi's method of analysis, narratives were gathered through in-depth interviews with selected parents from rural and urban communities. The findings revealed six major themes: (1) daily struggles with behavioral and emotional challenges, (2) physical and emotional strain during episodes of illness and hospitalization, (3) financial constraints including indebtedness and lack of stable income, (4) resilience grounded in faith, hope, and prayer, (5) the necessity of hard work, savings, and supplemental income, and (6) the power of unconditional love, acceptance, and family involvement in nurturing a child's growth. Participants consistently turned to faith in God as their emotional anchor, while also demonstrating perseverance through collaborative caregiving, active parenting, and community resource-seeking. Despite the multifaceted hardships, parents embraced their children as blessings, rejecting societal stigma and choosing to lead with compassion and hope. These findings underscore the importance of targeted support systems, inclusive policies, and mental health interventions that affirm both the challenges and strength of parents navigating the lifelong responsibility of raising a child with special needs.

**Keywords:** *phenomenological study, parents of children with special needs, resilience, faith-based coping, financial struggles, unconditional love*

### Introduction

Parenting a child with special needs is a profoundly demanding experience that presents a unique set of challenges beyond typical caregiving. These challenges manifest across emotional, physical, financial, and social domains, often placing families under significant stress. Research indicates that parents of children with special needs face heightened risks for anxiety, depression, and caregiver burnout due to the complexity and intensity of their caregiving responsibilities (Boovaragasamy et al., 2019; Schwartzman, Reiter, & Hepburn, 2021). In addition to providing day-to-day care, these parents must navigate complex healthcare systems, manage special education needs, attend therapy sessions, and contend with societal stigma, all of which compound their daily struggles.

In the context of the Philippines, where access to comprehensive services for children with disabilities remains limited and often centralized in urban areas, families in rural and economically disadvantaged regions face even more significant obstacles. The geographic and institutional gaps in support intensify the challenges for parents, making them more reliant on personal, familial, and community-based resources. Cultural perceptions of disability, along with inadequate institutional support, add additional layers of strain on these families (Lardizabal-Dado, 2020). As a result, many Filipino families turn to spiritual beliefs, extended kinship networks, and personal resilience to cope with the demands of caregiving (Epperson, 2020; Iacob, Gavrila-Ardelean, & Preda, 2020). Faith, along with deep familial love, emerges as a critical source of strength, helping parents navigate overwhelming circumstances and persevere in the face of adversity.

The importance of understanding the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs cannot be overstated, particularly when it comes to developing inclusive and responsive interventions. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, offers a powerful approach to explore these personal narratives. By focusing on how parents construct meaning, develop strength, and adapt to their unique realities, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the emotional, psychological, and practical challenges these parents encounter (Moustakas, 1994). The study will examine the coping mechanisms and emotional landscapes of these parents, shedding light on the complex nature of their daily struggles and the resilience they demonstrate.

### Research Questions

This study focused on the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs:

1. What are the lived experiences of parents in raising a child with special needs in terms of emotional, physical, social, and financial challenges?
2. How do parents of children with special needs develop coping mechanisms and resilience amidst caregiving stressors and societal stigma?
3. What forms of support (faith-based, familial, institutional) do parents rely on, and how do these influence their caregiving journey and well-being?

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs in a rural Philippine setting. The phenomenological method was selected to capture the depth and essence of participants' personal experiences, emotions, and coping strategies as they navigate the complexities of caregiving. Guided by Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method of data analysis, the research aimed to provide a structured and rigorous interpretation of participants' narratives, ensuring an in-depth understanding of their emotional and psychological realities.

### Participants

A total of 12 participants were purposively selected based on specific criteria: they must be biological parents or primary caregivers of a child diagnosed with a developmental or physical disability and have at least five years of caregiving experience. The sample size of 12 was chosen to allow for rich, detailed narratives while maintaining manageability within the scope of the study. This sample size strikes a balance between achieving thematic saturation and ensuring the feasibility of the research process. By focusing on this group, the study aimed to provide insights from a diverse range of experiences while remaining focused enough to capture the complexity of the phenomenon.

### Procedure

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the local dialect to ensure authenticity and emotional accuracy. The interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes and reflective journaling were also utilized to capture non-verbal cues and contextual insights, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

### Ethical Considerations

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing. These strategies were employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings by allowing participants to review the data and ensuring multiple perspectives were incorporated into the analysis. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation, were strictly observed throughout the study.

Given the emotional nature of the subject matter, special care was taken in managing participants who may have experienced emotional distress during the interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and counseling referrals were provided if needed. The researcher also created a supportive and empathetic environment to help participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

## Results and Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs, focusing on the challenges they face in the context of financial hardship, social judgment, emotional distress, and unconditional love. Four major themes emerged: Emotional and Physical Struggles in Daily Caregiving, Financial Burden and Survival Strategies, Strength Rooted in Faith, Hope, and Love, and Acceptance, Advocacy, and Active Involvement. These themes reflect not only the immense challenges parents face but also the deep reservoirs of resilience that enable them to navigate the complex journey of special needs caregiving.

Table 1.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Core Meaning</i>	<i>Participant Insights</i>
Emotional and Physical Struggles in Daily Caregiving	Highlights the daily exhaustion, stress, and physical toll of caring for a child with special needs.	Caregiving is emotionally and physically demanding.	"He becomes wild, throws things, even hits me when hungry." – P4
Financial Burden and Survival Strategies	Focuses on the economic hardships, debts, and income-generating activities parents undertake.	Financial survival is a daily battle.	"Kapoy na kaayo... I just let him be sometimes." – P2 "Ako gani napriso tungod sa utang para lang sa hospital." – P7
Strength Rooted in Faith, Hope, and Love	Shows how parents draw strength from faith, never giving up, and loving their child unconditionally.	Faith and love empower parental endurance.	"Gin-ubra ko tindahan para may backup kami." – P1 "I just trust in God... because if I'm gone, who will take care of him?" – P7
Acceptance, Advocacy, and Active Involvement	Reflects the importance of accepting the child's condition, defending them, and participating actively in their care.	Advocacy starts with acceptance and involvement.	"Accept lang kung unsa, bata mo na." – P1 "Di nila dapat itago. Ipakita nila nga palangga nila ilang bata." – P6 "Gindala ko siya sa SNED para maka-interact siya." – P2

## Emotional and Physical Struggles in Daily Caregiving

Caring for children with special needs imposes significant emotional and physical demands on parents. Participants shared experiences of fatigue, sleep deprivation, and the stress of managing daily tantrums or aggressive behaviors. For instance, one mother recounted how her 15-year-old son becomes violent when hungry, throwing objects and hitting her (P4), while another described the overwhelming exhaustion of constantly monitoring her child in public places (P2). These findings align with Boovaragasamy et al. (2019), who emphasized that parents of children with disabilities experience higher levels of psychological distress and physical strain compared to parents of neurotypical children. The added strain often results from the unpredictability of the child's needs and the lack of time for self-care, with physical tasks such as feeding, lifting, and soothing children contributing to the burden. This study's findings further corroborate the challenges highlighted by previous literature, providing a deeper insight into how parents' emotional and physical well-being is impacted by caregiving responsibilities.

## Financial Burden and Survival Strategies

The second theme underscores the economic toll of raising a child with special needs. Participants described the ongoing cycle of debt, which stemmed from frequent hospitalizations, the need to stop working to provide care, and their reliance on small businesses to sustain their families. One parent shared how she was once imprisoned due to unpaid hospital debts (P7), while another highlighted the crucial role of a sari-sari store in securing emergency funds (P1). These narratives resonate with the findings of Neece, McIntyre, and Fenning (2020), who documented that families with children with developmental disabilities face heightened financial stress due to healthcare costs, special education expenses, and reduced earning potential. Additionally, Ren et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of resource management for families under financial strain, a point echoed by several participants who practiced daily coin saving as a survival tactic. The financial burden revealed in this study is consistent with existing research, providing further evidence of the systemic challenges these families face.

## Strength Rooted in Faith, Hope, and Love

Despite these overwhelming challenges, participants highlighted the importance of faith in God, unconditional love, and hope as key sources of strength. Many participants shared that prayer was their primary coping mechanism, with a deep belief that God would never abandon them in their struggles (P3, P4, P7). This aligns with Iacob et al. (2020) and Karpman, Gonzalez, and Kenney (2020), who found that spiritual coping plays a significant role in improving the emotional well-being of caregivers of children with disabilities. Hope, as expressed through narratives about not giving up and believing that improvement is possible, became a vital source of inner strength. Faith not only provided emotional comfort but also acted as a powerful motivator, enabling parents to persevere despite social isolation or chronic poverty. This finding highlights the transformative role of spirituality in shaping parents' resilience, as evidenced by the participants' stories.

## Acceptance, Advocacy, and Active Involvement

The final theme focuses on the transformative power of acceptance and active parental involvement. Participants acknowledged that hiding their children or denying their condition could only result in harm. Instead, they embraced their role as advocates, defending their children against public ridicule and seeking opportunities for their social inclusion, such as enrolling them in Special Needs Education (SNED) programs (P2, P6). Eapen, Hiscock, and Williams (2020) highlighted that creating a collaborative and accepting environment is essential for the thriving of children with special needs. Similarly, Arif et al. (2021) emphasized that early observation and understanding of developmental differences are key for timely intervention. Participants echoed this by advising new parents to be proactive and attentive in their children's development. Moreover, Lardizabal-Dado (2020) affirmed that parents must take on the dual role of caregiver and educator, fostering their child's physical and social development through love, guidance, and a stable support system. The parents in this study reinforced these perspectives, demonstrating the importance of both emotional and practical involvement in their children's lives.

## Conclusions

The lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs reveal a profound narrative of unconditional love, resilience, faith, and sacrifice. This study illuminated the emotional, physical, financial, and social challenges these parents encounter on a daily basis, yet it also uncovered their remarkable strength and perseverance. Despite facing recurring hospitalizations, behavioral struggles, social stigma, and economic hardship, parents remain steadfast in their commitment to their children's well-being.

The themes of faith in God, unwavering love, collaborative caregiving, and the importance of acceptance illustrate that resilience is not merely an inherent trait but a continuous, conscious choice. Participants' narratives underscored the need for deeper societal understanding and systemic support. Faith served as a coping mechanism and source of hope, while strategies such as saving, finding additional income, and seeking community or family assistance became key to their survival.

Moreover, parental acceptance emerged as the bedrock of their strength—acceptance not only of the child's condition but of the journey it entails. The findings affirm that while the road is undeniably difficult, it is also deeply meaningful and transformative. The study strongly supports the call for holistic interventions, increased access to special education services, emotional support systems, and

government programs that can empower these families to thrive.

However, the study also has limitations that should be addressed in future research. The sample size, though appropriate for qualitative inquiry, was limited to 12 participants, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of parents in different regions or socio-economic backgrounds. Further studies could benefit from a larger and more geographically diverse sample to capture a broader range of experiences. Additionally, this study focused on the parents' experiences, but future research could explore the perspectives of children with special needs themselves, healthcare providers, and educators to provide a more holistic view of the caregiving process.

Ultimately, this research reminds us that behind every special child is a family that has fought, endured, and loved with a depth few can truly comprehend. It is essential for society to recognize and support these families, ensuring they have the resources, understanding, and opportunities to thrive. By building stronger systems of support, we can help families of children with special needs continue their journey with greater resilience and hope.

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