

Autistic women's experience of parenting: A qualitative analysis of Reddit posts

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BACKGROUND

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of autistic mothers utilising publicly accessible data from Reddit's online community r/AutisticParents.

There is limited empirical research on autistic women's experience of lifespan issues most salient to them, particularly reproductive health, and motherhood. The transition to motherhood is already recognised as a significant life event with associated physical and psychosocial outcomes, and yet autistic mothers are an under-represented group in both parental and autism research.

A review of the extant literature on autistic mothers found a mix of qualitative and quantitative studies that investigated autistic motherhood. These studies outlined the sensory difficulties, communication challenges, stigma, and comorbidities for autistic women, but each study focussed only on the perinatal period of motherhood.

There is scant research that engages with autistic mothers' strengths, successes, and the unique experiences they bring to motherhood nor is there sufficient research investigating the experiences of autistic mothers in later stages of parenting. Further investigation is needed to better understand both the needs and experiences of autistic mothers, and their presentation of autism.



Inclusion criteria comprised discussion pertaining to self-disclosed autistic mothers, resulting in 23 posts and 131 comments selected for coding.

FINDINGS

Analysis of these findings show the ways online communities offer support and validation of autistic mothering.

Identified themes included:

- **Autistic Mothering is Different**
Perspectives, strengths, and difficulties experienced as an autistic mother.
- **Autistic Mothers Need Autistic Mothers**
Self-disclosure, validation, normalisation, and empathy towards the experiences of fellow autistic mothers.
- **Autistic Mothers Experience Stigma**
Experiences or anticipation of being stigmatised for being an autistic mother.
- **Learnings from Lockdown**
Ways in which the pandemic has impacted the experiences of autistic mothers.

Findings extend existing research by offering insight into the ways autism impacts mothers beyond the perinatal period. Notably, *Autistic Mothering is Different* reveals the ways autistic mothers are impacted by their sensory sensitivities and social communication challenges, while *Autistic Mothers Need Autistic Mothers* offers insight into the support offered by those with mutual understanding. Findings have important implications for the future design and delivery of support services for autistic mothers.

“There's added pressure, because if I seem weird to other parents, they'll be less likely to invite us to their kids' parties or let their kids come to our house.”

Autistic mother