

## A Review on Factors Affecting Marital Adjustment among Parents of Autistic Children and Gender Effects

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**Abstract:** We aimed to systematically review studies that examine factors affecting marital adjustment among parents of children with disabilities, especially the autistic children. Besides, we emphasized the effects of gender on marital adjustments among the parents. There were at least 21 articles reviewed. The related journal articles on factor affecting marital adjustments were downloaded with cut off limit from 1992 to 2012. The articles were then analyzed and organized according to the definitions of marital adjustments and various factor affecting marital adjustments. We found there was no conclusive evidence regarding the factors affecting the marital among parents of autistics children. There was conclusive evidence from the reviewed literature regarding gender effect, yet the number of article supporting it was small. Mothers of autistics children were more affected in the marital adjustments as compared to fathers. Finally, with conclusion we then suggest for future interventional study.

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### 1. Introduction

Autism is identified as a developmental disorder with prominent impairments in social reciprocity, language impairment and restricted repetitive behaviors or interest (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). It is often observed and diagnosed within the first three years of life (Newschaffer, Fallin, & Lee, 2002), and continues throughout lifespan (Shattuck et al., 2007). Generally, the common features of autistic disorder include having trouble interacting with others and a tendency to odd interests. These hallmarks of autistic characteristics affect the whole family system.

Families of children with autism face many stressors and challenges, including the unexpectedness of their child's disability; their child's behavioral deficits and aversive behaviors; difficulties in finding answers and services; confusion from competing claims about treatment efficacy; and strained interactions with neighbors, relatives, and people in community settings (Briesmeister & Schaefer, 2007). Among all, behaviors displayed by autistic children are often the most difficult for parents to manage. Moreover, today's partnership in marriage is more challenging and more difficult than in the past years; especially couples with special needs children.

In general, marriage is one of the most serious and important commitments people make in their lifetime. It is a central bond created by a couple and is the basis to start a new life. When spouses manage to get along with each other to achieve harmonious working relationship in different areas of

their marital life, adjustment is deemed successful (AlHorany et al., 2011).

Therefore, we aimed to systematically review the literature on factors affecting marital adjustment among parents of the autistics children. Additionally, gender effect on marital adjustments among the parents was emphasized. However, we first reviewed on the definitions of marital adjustments. At last, we suggest for future studies.

### 2. Material and Methods

#### 2.1. Material

There were at least 21 articles reviewed. Of 21 articles there were 13 articles on factor affecting marital adjustments. The articles were empirical and meta-analysis review on the factors affecting marital adjustments among parents of children with disabilities.

#### 2.2. Procedure

The articles were mainly downloaded using University Putra Malaysia subscribed data based. Scopus, Springer and Ebscohost were among the frequently used. In addition, Google scholar was also employed. The related journal articles on factor affecting marital adjustments downloaded with cut off limit from 1992 to 2012 only. The downloaded articles were then summarized and organized in the following sections.

### 3. Results

First, the downloaded articles were analyzed on definition of marital adjustments. Second, they were on various factor affecting marital adjustments

among parents of children with disabilities, third on parents with autistic children. Finally, an emphasis of gender effect on marital adjustment of the parents were reviewed.

### 3.1. Definitions of marital adjustment

Marital adjustment has long been a popular topic in studies of family, probably because the concept is believed to be closely related to the stability of a given marriage. Well-adjusted marriages are expected to last for a long time, while poorly adjusted ones end in divorce. Thus, Spanier (1976) identified marital adjustment as “an ever-changing process with a qualitative dimension which can be evaluated at any point in time on a dimension from well adjusted to maladjusted” (p. 17). Also, Locke & Wallace (1959) defined marital adjustment as the “accommodation of a husband and wife to each other at a given time” (p. 251). Recently, Dimkpa (2010) stated that marital adjustment refers to the ability of a couple to become satisfied, happy and successfully achieved a set of particular tasks in their marriage. Therefore, to achieve and enhance marital adjustment, satisfaction, and happiness, troublesome marital differences have to be met (Ebenuwa-Okoh, 2010).

Moreover, marital adjustment or also named dyadic adjustment according to Spanier (1976) may be conceptualized as a process and the outcome is measured by the amount of: (1) troublesome dyadic differences; (2) interpersonal tensions and personal anxiety; (3) dyadic satisfaction; (4) dyadic cohesion; and (5) consensus on matters of importance to dyadic functioning. These aspects of adjustment are for both married and unmarried couples (Spanier, 1976).

For operational definition, previous literature has shown that there are several tests available for the measurement of marital adjustment. The most widely used measurements for marital adjustment are Dyadic adjustment scale (DAS), and Lock Wallace marital adjustment test (MAT).

### 3.2. Factors Affecting Marital Adjustment

According to the role theory, marital adjustment occurs when each spouse enacts his/her role effectively to the satisfaction of the other. As such, marital adjustment is influenced by an array of factors including role expectations of spouses, job satisfaction, socio-economic background, sexual adjustment, communication, emotional stability in marriage, level of work commitment, and change in value system (Dimkpa, 2010). In addition, some studies have identified other factors such as emotional expression, communication flow, financial management, and involvement in the place of work may influence marital adjustment (Ebenuwa-Okoh, 2010).

Previous research highlights different factors that influence couples' marital adjustment.

Shakhmalian (2005), and Fenell (1993) had identified lifetime commitment to marriage, loyalty to spouse, strong moral values, respect for spouse as a friend, share household chores, sexual fidelity, desire to be a good parent, spiritual commitment, desire to lease and support spouse, good companion, and willingness to forgive as well as be forgiven as the most important factors that help maintain long-term marital adjustment. Other studies found that husband's income and rearing the children are associated with marital satisfaction (Baker et al., 1997).

One aspect that is closely related to marital adjustment is the transition to parenthood, which is thought to be one of the most challenging stressors that may affect marital relationships (Lu, 2006). Adding a third person requires changes in the system of a couple's dyad life itself. The overall level of marital adjustment and family functioning may decline during the transition to parenthood. An empirical study conducted by Lawrence et al, (2008) examined levels and rates of changes in marital adjustment among comparable groups of voluntarily childless couples. Results indicated that the transition to parenthood was associated with experiencing greater decline in marital satisfaction compared to nonparents. This result is inline with Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne's, (1999) study which identified new parenting responsibilities as the primary contributor to the deterioration of marital satisfaction. On the other hand, having a disabled child portrays extra psychological symptoms including depression and difficulties that a family has to face (Hasting & Brown, 2002). These factors are discussed in details in the next section.

### 3.3. Marital Adjustment and Parents of Children with Disabilities

Parents of children with disabilities experienced more marital stress and discord than parents with typically developing children. In other words, marital and family functioning are also influenced by having a child with autism which is mean both their relationship with their spouses and their approach to parenting will be affected as well (Lickenbrock, Ekas, & Whitman, 2011; Montes & Halterman, 2007; Gau et al., 2012). Generally, children with disabilities are more likely to see their parents' divorce than are other children (Dunn et al., 2001). Yet, the increased risk of divorce (3% to 6%) is smaller than many would expect (Singer, 2004), divorce cases are still inconclusive as a probability of having a child with autism.

Several studies such as Rodrigue, Morgan & Geffken (1990) investigated the impact of autistic child on marital satisfaction. Comparing mothers with autistic children and mothers with Down syndrome and developmentally normal children matched on

several pertinent demographic variables. The results of the study disclosed that mothers of autistic children reported less parenting competence, less marital adjustment, more family cohesion, and family adaptability than mothers in the other two groups. Disrupted planning, caretaker burden, and family burden are also extremely high among mothers of autistic children. Moreover, results showed that mothers of autistic children frequently used self-blame as a coping strategy, compared to mothers of developmentally normal children

Lee (2009) conducted a study to investigate marital adjustment between parents of children with and without High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorders. Samples of the study consisted of 48 parents of children with autism and 26 parents of children without any disabilities. Parents of children with autism reported lower marital adjustment scores in satisfaction subscale and overall marital adjustment than the control group. This result suggests that the impact of children with development disability varies among members and families.

Brobst, Clopton, and Hendrick (2009) stated that parents with disabled children are being affected by internal characteristics and external circumstances. Internal family characteristics include preexisting problems in the family, participation in spiritual and religious activities, and ability of the parents to seek support and assistance from the external sources of the spousal subsystem. The external circumstances include family's income level and participation in leisure and community activities. Craddock (1991) found that couples who possess marital characteristics such as cohesive, adaptable and flexible characteristics report better marital satisfaction than those who have chaotic and rigid characteristics.

Generally it is evident that transition to parenthood changes marital relationship. In other words, spouses' transition to parenting subsystem after the delivery of the first child in which the couple's dyad relationship requires the system to reorganize itself. In some cases, parents may unexpectedly receive a disabled child. Denial, blaming, sadness are considered the main signs of reactions of these families. Children with developmental disorders are also at a much higher risk for exhibiting behavioral problems than typically developing children (Bristol, 1996).

Literature shows that parenting a child with both developmental disorder and behavioral problems can create an especially challenging environment. Moreover, most research on families of children with developmental disabilities reports the negative effects of these children on their families compared to families of typical developing children. These negative effects include problems in family crises

such marital maladjustment, marital difficulties, family dysfunction, and parenting stress (Dunn et al., 2001; Higgins, Bailey, & Pearce, 2005; Gau et al., 2012).

Specifically, Sander & Morgan (1997) examined marital adjustment and parenting stress among parents in three different groups of families: autistic children, Down syndrome children, and developmentally normal children. The results indicated that parents with autistic children reported higher parenting stress and more adjustment family problems than other groups, also parents of Down syndrome children reported more stress and adjustment problems than parents of normal children. However, the how both disabilities are similar or different is yet to be investigated.

#### *3.4. Marital Adjustment and Parents of Autistics Children*

Children with autism exhibit a wide range of behavioral problems, as well as social and communication deficits that are stressful and challenging for parents (Hastings 2003). Several studies highlight relationships between child behavior problems and marital adjustment. One such study sought to examine how parenting autistic children influenced spouses' relationships. Brobst, Clopton, and Hendrick (2009) compared 25 couples whose children had autism with 20 couples whose children didn't have. The comparisons were made between the child's behavioral problems and the couples' relationship satisfaction. Results indicated that parents of children with autism experienced more intense child behavior problems, greater parenting stress, and also reported lower relationship satisfaction than parents in the comparison group.

Higgins et al. (2005) conducted a study to understand the perceptions and experiences of families who had autistic children. The results of the study showed that parents of autistic children reported lower marital happiness, family adaptability and cohesion than families of typically developing children. On a similar note, this study found continued support for the need of services that are aimed at enhancing marital and family functioning for families that have children with ASD.

Gau et al., (2012) compared marital relationship and family function among parents with autistic children and parents without. 151 families having autistic child and 113 families of typically developing children in Taiwan were assessed. Both groups completed the dyadic adjustment scale (DAS) and the family adaptability and cohesion evaluation scale. Findings of the study indicated that mothers of autistic children perceived less marital adjustment, dyadic consensus, affectionate expression, and family adaptability and cohesion than mothers of typically

developing children. Generally, this study demonstrated that having an autistic child is associated with mental health difficulties, marital instability, and family dysfunction. Thus the same study suggests that parenting counseling should focus on marital interactions such as communication style and parenting mental health of parents of autistic children.

To examine the associations between mothers' positive and negative perceptions of their children, marital adjustment, and maternal well-being, Lickenbrock (2011) conducted a research on mothers of autistic children who participated in a 30-day diary study. The results of the study revealed that marital adjustment mediated associations between positive perceptions and maternal well-being. Moreover, mothers who showed higher levels of positive perceptions of the autistic child recorded higher in marital adjustment and well-being. The results also

revealed that marital adjustment moderated the relationship between negative perceptions and negative maternal affect.

In contrast, some research did not support that marital adjustment is affected by having autistic children (Reyns, 2005; Montes & Halterman, 2007). Koegel et al. (1992) found that mothers of children with autism did not differ from mothers of children without disabilities on marital adjustment or family interactions. Moreover, Reyns (2005) found that there was no significant relationship between severity of autism and either perceived stress or marital satisfaction. This may be due to the fact that the characteristics of autism such as inability to build mutual relationships place a tension on parents and on their marriage, regardless of the severity of the disorder. All of the above discussed factors are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. A summary on factors affecting marital adjustments

NO	Author (Year)	Source	Type of articles	Factors affects MA	Findings
1	Bristol, D.W., Wachsman, J.T. and Greenwell, A. (1996)	Health Perspect.,	Empirical	Parenting stress	Support
2	Gau, S. S; Chou, M. C; Chiang, H. L; Lee, J. C; Wong, C. C; Chou, W. J; & Wu, Y.Y. (2012).	Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders	Empirical	mental health difficulties, marital instability, and family dysfunction	support
3	Hastings, R., & Brown, T. (2002).	American Journal of Mental Retardation	Empirical	Gender difference	support
5	Hastings, R.P. & Taunt, H.M. (2002).	American Journal on Mental Retardation,	Empirical	Gender difference	support
6	Higgins, D.J., Bailey, S.R., & Pearce, J.C. (2005).	Autism	Empirical	marital difficulties, family dysfunction, and parenting stress	support
7	Koegel, R. L., Koegel, L. K. & Surratt, A. (1992)	Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders	Empirical	having a child with autism	Did not support
8	Lee, G. (2009).	Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities	Empirical	having a child with autism	In conclusive
9	Lickenbrock, D. M., Ekas, N. V., & Whitman, T. L. (2011).	Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders	Empirical	Gender difference	support
10	Montes, G., & Halterman, J. S. (2007).	Pediatrics	Empirical	having a child with autism	Did not support
11	Ryens, T.A. (2005)	Alliant International University	Empirical	having a child with autism	Did not support
12	Shakhmalian, T. (2005).	Dissertation Abstracts International	Empirical	having a child with autism	Did not support
13	Singer, G. H., (2006).	American Journal on Mental Retardation	Meta Analysis Review	having a child with autism	Inconclusive

### 3.5 Gender effects

The majority of previous researches on marital adjustment to having a child with Autism Spectrum Disorders was mostly based on mothers' reports and rarely included fathers as respondents. Most studies have demonstrated that mothers seem to suffer more from their children's disabilities than fathers do (Gau et al. 2012, Hastings & Brown, 2002; Herring et al., 2006).

Mothers also display more psychological problems (Daniels et al., 2008; Hastings, Kovshoff, Ward, et al., 2005; Herring et al., 2006; Oelofsen & Richardson, 2006). In terms of marital adjustment, studies such as (Lee, 2009; Lickenbrock, Ekas, & Whitman, 2011; Gau et al., 2012) revealed that mothers of autistic children reported less marital adjustment, affectionate expression, family adaptability, and cohesion than fathers of autistic children. In general, gender plays a significant role in psychological factors (Shabani et al., 2011).

### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, marital adjustment may refer to individuals' transitional process from being single to being married, whereby individuals adjust their single lifestyle to marital lifestyle. Marital adjustment can be evaluated according to the couples' ability to meet with the new situations, whether they appear well-adjusted or poorly-adjusted. Marital satisfaction refers to individuals' experiences of their marriage and the degree of their needs is met. Spouses often adjust to situations regardless of the existence of marital happiness or marital satisfaction.

Precisely, the inconsistencies in previous findings on marital adjustment and transition to parenthood may be concluded that during the childbearing years, couples adjust to the changes of parenthood differently. Some couples report an increase or no change in the marital adjustment, while others report a decrease.

Therefore, although research in the area of marital satisfaction and transition to parenthood shows conflicting results, pre-parenthood marital quality may be the determining factors that enable couples to make a healthy transition. There was conclusive evidence from the reviewed literature regarding gender effect, yet the number of article supporting it was small. In a nut shell, more studies are needed, especially; study that systematically analyze the empirical findings. This study thus has filled in a small gap of literature on parents of autistics children and factor affecting their marital adjustments.

### 5. Suggestions

Despite the inconclusive findings, the reviewed literature indicated the important link

between support and relationship satisfaction between spouses when one spouse faced with more intense behavioral problems in their children. Parents with autistic children are at risk for decreased level of marital adjustment as well as less satisfaction with life, which in long run influences the marital and family functioning and parent-child interaction.

Therefore, we suggest adequacy of informal social support and coping patterns for healthier adaptation. Specifically, for mothers who have more adequate support from spouses, immediate, and extended family, as well as other parents, may report happier marriages and better adjusted to marriage., Previous approaches to autism that mistakenly blamed parents may have contributed to marital problems and parenting difficulty in dealing with the involved child should be avoided (Vijayalakshmi, 1997 )

Therapists should be especially careful when trying to ascertain parents' views of their child's behavioral problems. Therapists should also fully understand how much parents feel that the behavioral problems interfere with their child's life and their own life.

Therefore, parent support groups that emphasize sustaining couples' relationships during times of stress may be beneficial for families with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). We recommended both fathers and mothers to participate in support groups and to increase their social networks. In addition, we suggests variables such as level of child behavior problems, social support, respect for partner, and commitment have important values to be included in interventions with parents who have autistic children.

A family systems perspective identifies the various structural variables of the family. Various interventions can be utilized to intervene at different levels within the family system. Having an autistic child has created distance between the couple, then maybe the therapy focus on strengthening the marital subsystem so that the couple can provide support for each other and also maintain their parental roles within the family system.

Therefore we suggest the combination of the key concepts of structural family counseling and cognitive behavior treatment in a form of group counseling in achieving better marital adjustment and good psychological well being is yet to be studied extensively.

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