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Breaking the silence: Parent-led interventions for communication challenges in autism spectrum disorder

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Abstract

Communication difficulties constitute a core challenge for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), often resulting in social isolation and familial distress. While professional therapies remain vital, growing evidence highlights the transformative potential of parent-led interventions. This article presents findings from a mixed-methods study conducted in Dhaka and Khulna, Bangladesh, evaluating the effectiveness and lived experiences of parent-mediated communication strategies. Results indicate that parent engagement rooted in culturally relevant naturalistic routines leads to significant improvements in communicative behaviors, including eye contact and gesture use. The study advocates for expanded parent education and systemic support to bridge service gaps in resource-limited contexts.

Keywords: Bangladesh, autism spectrum disorder, parent-led interventions, communication development, mixed-methods

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, alongside restricted and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) ^[1]. Among these, communication challenges stand out as some of the most profound and enduring obstacles, impeding children's ability to form social relationships, express needs, and participate fully in their communities (Tager-Flusberg *et al.*, 2017) ^[11]. Deficits may include delayed or absent speech, limited use of gestures, difficulties understanding nonliteral language such as sarcasm, and challenges in initiating or sustaining conversations (Lord *et al.*, 2020) ^[11].

Globally, interventions to support communication development have traditionally emphasized clinician-led therapies, such as speech-language therapy and applied behavior analysis. However, access to these services is often limited, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Bangladesh, due to shortages of trained professionals, financial constraints, and geographical barriers (Rahman *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, parents and caregivers frequently bear the primary responsibility for facilitating communication development, underscoring the importance of parent-led interventions.

Parent-led interventions are defined as approaches where caregivers are trained and supported to implement evidence-based communication strategies within naturalistic, everyday contexts. These interventions not only enhance language outcomes but also promote emotional security and family cohesion (Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019) ^[4]. They enable frequent, contextually meaningful practice that clinic-based therapies alone cannot provide. As the World Health Organization (2022) ^[13] increasingly endorses family-centered early intervention, research must explore the efficacy and feasibility of these approaches within diverse cultural settings.

This article integrates a comprehensive literature review, a sociocultural theoretical framework, and empirical findings from a mixed-methods study conducted in urban Bangladesh. The aim is to examine the role of parent-led communication interventions for children with ASD and provide culturally relevant recommendations for practice and policy.

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Theoretical Framework

The foundation for parent-led interventions in ASD can be located within Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which posits that cognitive and language development occurs through social interaction and guided participation within a cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978) ^[12]. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) describes how learners acquire skills when supported by a more knowledgeable other commonly a parent or caregiver. In the context of ASD, parents scaffold communicative behaviors, tailoring input to their child's level and gradually increasing complexity as competence grows.

Complementing this, Social Interactionist Theory emphasizes that language emerges from meaningful communication exchanges motivated by social intent (Bruner, 1983) ^[2]. Both theories converge on the critical role of responsive, contingent interactions in fostering language acquisition. For children with ASD, who may have diminished social motivation or difficulty interpreting social cues, the active involvement of parents as empathetic communication partners is vital.

Together, these frameworks justify parent-led interventions as developmentally appropriate, culturally adaptable, and grounded in established principles of learning and communication development.

Literature Review

A substantial body of evidence supports the effectiveness of parent-mediated communication interventions for children with ASD. Green *et al.* (2010) ^[3] conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) demonstrating that parent training in communication techniques significantly enhanced joint attention and expressive language in young children. A meta-analysis by Siller *et al.* (2020) ^[10] reviewing over 25 studies reported moderate improvements in both receptive and expressive language and gains in social reciprocity.

Core strategies with strong empirical backing include the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions (NDBIs), and responsive interaction techniques that encourage following the child's lead, modelling language, and reinforcing communicative attempts (Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Oono, Honey, & McConachie, 2013) ^[4, 6].

Despite positive outcomes, the literature notes challenges with sustaining parental engagement, especially when support and training are limited. In LMIC contexts, cultural adaptation of interventions is crucial, as family routines, beliefs, and resource availability influence implementation (Shah *et al.*, 2021) ^[9]. Research specific to Bangladesh remains scarce, emphasizing the importance of localized studies to inform scalable parent-led models.

Methodology

- **Participants:** Thirty primary caregivers of children aged 3 to 9 years with formal ASD diagnoses participated in this study. Recruitment occurred through autism support groups and clinical centers in Dhaka and Khulna. Participants represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, with most mothers aged between 25 and 40 years.
- **Design and Procedure:** A mixed-methods exploratory design was employed. Quantitative data were collected via structured surveys assessing the frequency and type of communication strategies used, along with caregiver

perceptions of communicative progress. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five parents, selected for diverse backgrounds, to explore lived experiences, emotional impacts, and perceived barriers.

- Ethical approval was obtained from local institutional review boards. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained throughout.
- **Measures:** The quantitative survey included Likert-scale items on routine-based teaching, gesture use, PECS application, and observed child communication improvements. The qualitative interview protocol focused on parents' narratives about strategy use, emotional connection, and support needs.

Results

Quantitative Findings

- Routine-based teaching (e.g., narrating daily activities) was reported as "always" practiced by 70% of parents.
- Gestures and facial expressions were used consistently by 88%.
- Visual aids (PECS and picture cards) were employed by 61%.
- At least moderate improvement in communication was perceived by 64%.
- Eye contact increase was the most commonly observed benefit (55%).

These data underscore the widespread adoption of naturalistic, routine-embedded strategies and their perceived positive impact on communication development.

Qualitative Themes

- **Emotional Connection as a Foundation:** Parents emphasized that narrating daily routines fostered engagement and responsiveness. One mother from Khulna shared, "When I started narrating our day 'this is your spoon, this is your rice' he began to respond, first with looks, then gestures and words."
- **Visual Tools Enhance Clarity:** Use of picture cards enabled children to express choices and needs, reducing frustration. A father in Dhaka said, "Picture cards made a big difference. My child pointed to symbols before choosing food it was the first time I felt we truly understood each other".
- **Need for Structured Support:** Several parents expressed a desire for formal training and peer support groups to improve their skills and confidence.
- **Holistic growth beyond words:** Improvements were noted not only in speech but in social engagement and confidence, reflecting broader developmental gains.

Discussion

These findings align with international evidence supporting parent-led interventions as effective and adaptable across cultural contexts (Green *et al.*, 2010; Roberts & Kaiser, 2015) ^[3, 8]. The high prevalence of routine-based and gesture-supported communication demonstrates congruence with sociocultural theories emphasizing contextual learning (Vygotsky, 1978) ^[12]. Moreover, qualitative insights highlight the profound emotional and relational benefits beyond linguistic gains. The study reveals important gaps, notably the need for accessible, culturally appropriate

training programs and community support structures in Bangladesh. This aligns with challenges identified in other LMICs, where families often feel isolated and under-resourced (Shah *et al.*, 2021) ^[9]. Addressing these barriers requires policy attention and innovative service delivery models, such as group parent training and telehealth. Limitations include the small sample size and urban focus, which may limit generalizability. Future research should extend to rural regions and assess long-term developmental outcomes of parent-led interventions.

Conclusion

Breaking the silence surrounding communication difficulties in children with ASD requires a holistic approach that empowers parents as central facilitators of development. This study demonstrates that parent-led interventions, rooted in culturally relevant naturalistic routines and supported by training, can produce meaningful improvements in communication. Systematic integration of parent education into early intervention services is essential to increase access and equity, particularly in resource-constrained settings like Bangladesh. By supporting parents, we nurture not only language skills but also family resilience and social inclusion.

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