

Mental Health in Black Families of Children with Autism: Implications for Child Well-Being and Family Functioning

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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnoses, now affecting 1 in 36 children, poses significant challenges for families, particularly those from marginalized communities. Research consistently shows that parents of children with ASD experience higher levels of stress and depression compared to parents of typically developing children or children with other disabilities. This elevated psychological distress can negatively impact both parents' well-being and the quality of care they are capable of providing to children. Addressing the mental health concerns of caregivers of children with autism is of critical importance, especially in marginalized communities. This commentary examines the potential link between poor mental health of caregivers and child maltreatment, focusing on the intersectional experiences of Black families of children with autism. Black parents of children with ASD face unique stressors, including barriers to adequate educational support and healthcare, financial strains, and stigmatization. These challenges can lead to isolation, depression, and heightened stress levels. The views expressed in this commentary emphasize the need for culturally responsive interventions to support the mental health of Black parents caring for children with ASD. By prioritizing parents' mental health, we can potentially improve overall family well-being and reduce the risk of child maltreatment.

Keywords: *autism, mental health, Black families, parents, supports*

The prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has risen dramatically in recent decades, with current estimates indicating that 1 in 36 children in the United States have the diagnosis (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). This increase has caused significant strain on educational, healthcare, and social service systems struggling to meet the complex needs of both children with ASD and their families (Chiarotti & Venerosi, 2020). While much attention has focused on expanding diagnostic and intervention services, less emphasis has been placed on supporting the mental health and well-being of parents caring for children with ASD, particularly within marginalized families who face unique challenges and barriers.

This commentary examines the critical importance of mental health support for Black parents of

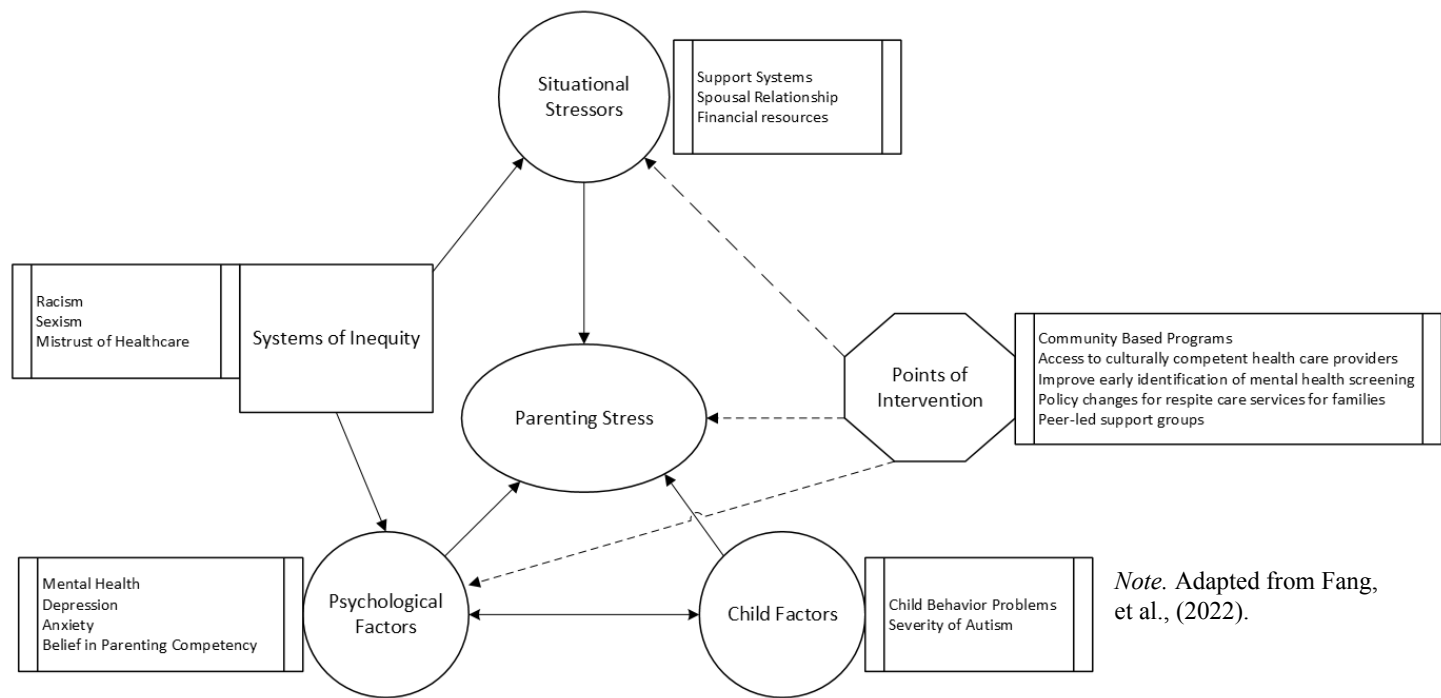
children with ASD. Drawing on recent empirical literature, we explore the unique stressors and challenges Black families face. A model adapted from Fang et al.'s (2022) *Parenting Stress* (see Figure 1) illustrates the intersection of these issues to add context as we explore the potential consequences of prolonged parental stress and poor mental health on family functioning and child outcomes.

Additionally, we consider how chronic stress and untreated mental health issues may increase the risk of child maltreatment in already overburdened families. Ultimately, we offer recommendations for culturally responsive mental health supports and family-centered interventions to promote resilience and positive outcomes for Black families raising children with ASD.

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Figure 1

Adapted Model of Parenting Stress



Stressors Unique to Black Families

Raising a child with ASD presents significant challenges for all families and the intersectional experiences of minority families compound this reality. Black parents often encounter a complex series of additional stressors related to systemic racism, economic disparities, and cultural stigma that exacerbate the ongoing stress of caring for a child with autism. A growing body of research has documented the unique experiences of Black families navigating ASD diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing care for their children, highlighting their strength and determination.

In a systematic review of over 60 studies examining the experiences of families of children with ASD across World Health Organization African regions, Baloyi et al. (2024) identified several common challenges faced by Black families, including:

disparity in education systems and healthcare systems, inadequate social support, financial strain, and stigmatization leading to isolation from extended family and community networks. These findings align with research on Black families of children with ASD in the United States, who report similar experiences of marginalization and barriers to care (Burkett et al., 2017; Dababnah et al., 2022).

For Black single parents in particular, the intersecting impacts of racism, classism, and sexism create additional layers of oppression and stress as they attempt to access services and support for their children with ASD. Singh (2023) conducted an intersectional analysis of narratives from Black single mothers who relied on public health insurance to care for their children with ASD. The study exposed compounded discrimination and structural barriers for single mothers attempting to navigate complex bureaucratic systems to obtain diagnoses,

therapies, and educational support for their children. The narratives revealed common challenges like dismissals and microaggressions from providers; significant economic constraints related to food, housing, and transportation; and barriers to accessing therapeutic services.

The chronic stress of caring for a child with high support needs coupled with experiences of systemic racism and economic hardship places Black parents at elevated risk for mental health challenges. Multiple studies have documented higher rates of stress, depression, and anxiety among parents of children with ASD compared to parents of neurotypical children or children with other disabilities (Hastings et al., 2005; Olsson & Hwang, 2006). Black parents face additional psychological burdens related to racial trauma, cultural stigma, and mistrust of healthcare systems, all of which may exacerbate mental health risks and create barriers to seeking support.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Support

Black parents of children with ASD are at an elevated risk for mental health challenges, yet often face significant obstacles to accessing quality mental health care. The cultural stigma surrounding mental illness and help-seeking behaviors remains prevalent in many Black communities, leading some parents to avoid or delay seeking mental health support, even when experiencing significant distress (Pearson et al., 2022). Mistrust of healthcare institutions stemming from historical and ongoing experiences of racism and a lack of culturally competent providers today create further barriers to engagement in mental health services.

Research by Dababnah et al. (2018) examining the experiences of Black parents accessing ASD-related services found that many encountered dismissive attitudes, cultural insensitivity, and outright discrimination from providers. These negative experiences often led to delayed diagnosis and treatment for their children, increasing stress and frustration in parents attempting to advocate

for their children's needs. The compounded effects of provider bias, cultural mismatch, and systemic barriers within healthcare and educational systems contribute to poorer mental health outcomes for Black parents of children with ASD.

Economic constraints also play a significant role in limiting access to mental health support for many Black families. Single mothers, in particular, often struggle to balance work obligations with the intensive caregiving needs of a child with ASD, leading to financial strain and reduced ability to afford mental health services *for themselves* (Singh, 2023). Even when public insurance coverage is available, finding providers who accept Medicaid and have expertise in both ASD and culturally responsive care for Black families can be highly challenging.

Consequences of Untreated Parental Mental Health Issues

The chronic stress and mental health challenges experienced by many Black parents of children with ASD can have far-reaching consequences for both parent and child well-being if left unaddressed. A substantial body of research has documented the negative impacts of parental stress and depression on parent-child interactions, family functioning, and child outcomes in families affected by ASD. Of particular concern is the potential for chronic stress and untreated mental health issues to increase the risk of child maltreatment in families already struggling to meet the complex needs of a child with ASD. While the majority of parents of children with disabilities provide loving care despite significant challenges, research has shown elevated rates of maltreatment among children with disabilities, including ASD (Maclean et al., 2017). A study by McDonnell et al. (2019) found that children with ASD were more at risk for maltreatment even when compared to other maltreated youth. The authors suggest that the complex care needs and behavioral challenges associated with ASD may overwhelm parents' capacity to provide adequate care, particularly in the context of limited social support and resources. The intersection of parental mental

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health issues, economic strain, social isolation, and the behavioral challenges associated with ASD may create conditions that increase the likelihood of neglect or abuse, mainly when adequate support systems are not in place.

Hastings et al. (2005) found that mothers reported higher levels of depression compared to fathers of children with ASD and that maternal depression is predictive of increased parenting stress. Child behavior problems also predicted higher maternal stress, creating a cyclical pattern in which parental mental health challenges and child difficulties exacerbate one another. This aligns with earlier work by Gray (2002) demonstrating that parents of children with more severe ASD symptoms and behavioral challenges experienced more significant emotional distress and were at higher risk for depression.

Poor parental mental health can directly impact the quality of care and support provided to children with ASD. Depressed parents may have difficulty consistently implementing behavioral interventions, maintaining routines, and providing the high levels of engagement and responsiveness needed to support their child's development (Greenlee et al., 2023). Additionally, parental stress and mental health issues are associated with increased use of harsh parenting practices and reduced warmth in parent-child interactions, which may exacerbate challenging behaviors in children with ASD (Brei et al., 2015).

Of particular concern is the potential for chronic stress and untreated mental health issues to increase the risk of child maltreatment in families already struggling to meet the complex needs of a child with ASD. While the majority of parents of children with disabilities provide loving care despite significant challenges, research has shown elevated rates of maltreatment among children with disabilities, including ASD (Maclean et al., 2017). The intersection of parental mental health issues, economic strain, social isolation, and the behavioral challenges associated with ASD may create conditions that increase the likelihood of neglect or

abuse, mainly when adequate support systems are not in place.

A study by McDonnell et al. (2019) found that children with ASD were more likely to be maltreated compared to children without ASD. Notably, children with ASD were more at risk for maltreatment even when compared to other maltreated youth. The authors suggest that the complex care needs and behavioral challenges associated with ASD may overwhelm parents' capacity to provide adequate care, particularly in the context of limited social support and resources.

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For Black families facing additional stressors related to systemic racism and economic marginalization, the risk of neglect stemming from parental burnout and mental health challenges may be further elevated. The chronic stress and mental health challenges experienced by many Black parents of children with ASD can have far-reaching consequences for both parent and child well-being if left unaddressed.

It is critical to note that experiences of racism and discrimination within child welfare systems may also contribute to disproportionate reporting and investigation of Black families (Boyd, 2014). However, the potential for parental mental health issues to negatively impact child well-being in families affected by ASD underscores the urgent need for accessible, culturally responsive mental health support for Black parents.

Culturally Responsive Mental Health Supports

Addressing the mental health needs of Black parents raising children with ASD requires a multifaceted approach that considers the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts shaping family experiences. Culturally responsive interventions that build on existing strengths and coping strategies within Black communities show promise for improving mental health outcomes and family resilience.

Research by Burkett et al. (2017) and Lewis et al. (2022) explores the role of faith, spirituality, and collective support systems in promoting coping and resilience among Black parents of children with ASD. Many families draw strength from religious beliefs, church involvement, and extended kinship networks when facing the challenges of raising a child with ASD. Mental health interventions that acknowledge and incorporate these cultural strengths may be more acceptable and effective for Black families compared to traditional Western approaches to mental health treatment.

The Parents Taking Action project, a community-based program developed by Dababnah et al. (2023), adapted an existing parent education curriculum to address the unique needs and experiences of Black families affected by ASD. Pilot results showed improvements in parental empowerment, knowledge about ASD, and the adoption of evidence-based strategies for supporting child development. Such culturally tailored interventions may help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health support and increase engagement among Black families.

Another innovative approach is the Fostering Advocacy, Communication, Empowerment, and Support (FACES) program examined by Pearson et al. (2022), which explored the intersection of mental health, autism, and faith in Black families. The study revealed that while many Black families associate mental health challenges with stigma and isolation, personal faith and support from religious communities played a central role in coping. Interventions that partner with faith communities

and incorporate spiritual coping strategies may be particularly effective for supporting the mental health of Black parents of children with ASD.

Improving access to culturally competent mental healthcare providers is another crucial component of addressing the mental health needs of Black parents. Training programs focused on increasing the cultural responsiveness of ASD service providers, such as the framework described by Jimenez-Gomez & Beaulieu (2022), can help reduce experiences of racism and bias in healthcare settings. Additionally, efforts to increase the representation of Black professionals within ASD-related fields may help build trust and improve engagement in mental health services among Black families.

Recommendations and Future Directions

Addressing the mental health needs of Black parents raising children with ASD requires a comprehensive approach involving policy changes, healthcare system improvements, community partnerships, and targeted interventions. Based on the current literature, we offer the following recommendations for supporting the mental health and well-being of Black families affected by ASD:

1. Increase funding and support for community-based, culturally responsive mental health interventions designed explicitly for Black parents of children with ASD. Programs that incorporate faith-based coping strategies, build on existing community strengths, and address the intersecting impacts of racism, economic stress, and disability-related challenges show promise.
2. Improve early identification and mental health screening for parents of children newly diagnosed with ASD, focusing on reducing barriers to care for Black families. This may involve partnering with trusted community organizations, providing in-home support services, and offering flexible scheduling options to accommodate work and caregiving responsibilities.

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3. Expand training in cultural responsiveness and anti-racism practices for all providers working with families affected by ASD, including healthcare professionals, educators, and social service providers. Efforts should be made to increase the representation of Black professionals in fields providing ASD-related services.
4. Advocate for policy changes to improve economic support and respite care services for families raising children with ASD with particular attention to the needs of single-parent households relying on public assistance.
5. Conduct further research on the unique experiences and mental health needs of Black fathers of children with ASD, and how intersecting identities related to gender, class, and immigration status may impact mental health outcomes for Black parents.
6. Develop and evaluate interventions aimed at reducing stigma surrounding mental health and disability within Black communities, potentially leveraging the influence of faith leaders and other trusted community figures.
7. Explore innovative approaches to providing mental health support, such as peer-led support groups, teletherapy options, and/or integration of mental health services within existing ASD treatment programs.

Conclusion

The mental health and well-being of Black parents raising children with ASD have been historically overlooked despite the significant challenges and stressors faced by this population. Addressing parental mental health is crucial not only for improving parents' quality of life, but also for promoting positive outcomes for children with ASD and reducing risks associated with chronic stress and caregiver burnout. By developing and implementing culturally responsive mental health supports that consider the unique experiences of Black families, we can work towards more equitable, effective, and compassionate care for all families affected by ASD.

Future research should continue to explore the intersections of race, culture, disability, and mental health to inform evidence-based interventions and policy changes. Additionally, centering Black parents' voices and lived experiences in research and program development efforts is essential for creating genuinely responsive and empowering supports. With targeted efforts to address the mental health needs of Black parents raising children with ASD, we can promote family resilience, improve child outcomes, and work towards a more just and inclusive system of care for all families affected by ASD. ■



About the Authors



Dr. Melissa Duchene-Kelly is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Bowie State University whose work integrates developmental psychology, family processes, early childhood education, and community-engaged research to address inequities affecting children and families in under-resourced communities. Her research focuses heavily on autism, including disparities in early identification, culturally responsive developmental screening, and the lived experiences of parents navigating diagnostic and support systems. She examines how social and structural factors contribute to delayed diagnosis and limited access to services, and she develops community-responsive approaches—such as parent education and early childhood partnerships—to strengthen screening pathways and support families immediately after diagnosis.

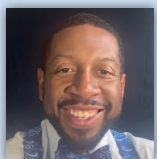
Dr. Duchene-Kelly directs the FAMILY (Focused Artificial Intelligence for Maternal, Infant, and Lifelong Years) Health Lab, established through a National Institute of Health (NIH) grant, where her work focuses on improving the health of families in underrepresented communities. Her research interests include enhancing access to quality behavioral healthcare across diverse populations and the implementation of artificial intelligence technologies to address health disparities in low-resourced areas. She also serves as Co-Lead of the Local Evaluation Program Team for Educare Washington, DC where she directs a data-driven evaluation program that assesses child development, family needs, and program implementation to inform continuous quality improvement and strengthen early childhood programming for under-resourced communities.



Dr. Zachary Price is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Towson University, where his research focuses on infant and toddler development, early educator workforce experiences, and equity and inclusion in early learning settings (0-K). Additionally, Dr. Price serves as the lead of the Local Evaluation Program Team for Educare Washington, DC where they conduct observations, child assessments, and family interviews to strengthen evidence-based practices in early childhood education and support continuous quality improvement efforts that promote school readiness and eliminate opportunity gaps for young children experiencing poverty. His research and evaluation work emphasizes culturally responsive practices and meaningful collaboration with educators, families, and communities to advance equity in early learning.



Dr. Michael Geuss is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Bowie State University. His research focuses on visual perception, spatial cognition, and the influence of non-visual factors on how humans interact with their environment. He utilizes experimental research methods in realistic settings and virtual environments to address applied and theoretical research questions. Previously, Dr. Geuss worked as a research scientist for the U.S. Army Research Laboratory and the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics. Currently, he enjoys teaching undergraduate courses on research methods, cognitive psychology, and sensation and perception.



Ronald "Ron" Drummond is a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Bowie State University where he focuses on examining how mentoring structures and school-based support systems influence the professional confidence and retention of Black male elementary educators. His research addresses the critical shortage of Black male teachers in elementary education and explores systemic interventions to support their professional development and longevity in the field.

Ron is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and co-owner of Above PAR ABA Services, a practice dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of individuals and families through applied behavior analysis. At Above PAR ABA, Ron's work is grounded in a mission to empower individuals with developmental differences to reach their fullest potential through evidence-based interventions and compassionate care. The practice utilizes individualized treatment plans tailored to meet the unique needs and goals of each client, implementing positive reinforcement strategies and data-driven techniques to help individuals develop essential skills and behaviors that promote independence, foster meaningful relationships, and facilitate lifelong learning. Through his clinical practice and academic research, Ron brings together expertise in behavioral science and educational leadership to support both children with developmental differences and the educators who serve them.

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