

Autism Severity And Parental Affection For Children With Autism As Influenced By Environmental Support

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Abstract: Children with autism often face challenges in social interaction, communication deficits, and repetitive behaviors. These issues can pose difficulties for parents in caring for their autistic children. The aim of this research was to explore the relationship between the severity of autism and parents' unconditional love, with religiosity and social support serving as moderating factors. This study employed a quantitative methodology using structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis. The sample consisted of 200 parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), aged 2 to 17 years, selected through non-probability sampling techniques. The instruments used included the unconditional love scale derived from the Porter Parent Acceptance scale (four items; $\alpha = .802$; AVE = .628), the social support scale (three items; $\alpha = .703$; AVE = .628), the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (ten items; $\alpha = .952$; AVE = .699), and the Childhood Autism Rating Scale (four items; $\alpha = .756$; AVE = .574). Results showed that parents' unconditional love was significantly influenced by the severity of autism ($b = -0.162$; $t(196) = 2.849$, $p = .005$), religiosity ($b = 0.534$; $t(196) = 7.101$, $p = .000$), and social support ($b = 0.157$; $t(196) = 2.426$, $p = .016$). Religiosity was found to play an important role in moderating the relationship between autism severity and parental unconditional love ($b = 0.249$; $t(196) = 3.262$, $p = .001$), whereas social support did not show a significant moderating effect ($b = -0.020$; $t(196) = .293$, $p = .770$). This suggests that religiosity can help parents maintain their unconditional love for their autistic children, while social support alone may not be sufficient to alleviate the stress involved. Therefore, it is recommended that parents of children with autism enhance their level of religiosity.

Keywords: Autism, Environmental Support, Severity Level Of Autism, Autism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition (disorder) that affects a person's cognition and behavior (Haputhanthri et al., 2019). ASD is a developmental disorder in various areas, namely communication and language, social interaction, as well as repetitive and stereotypical behavior patterns, which appear in the early years of development (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). The prevalence of children with Autism each year has increased in several countries, including Indonesia (Center of Disease Control [CDC], 2020). In 2019, it was estimated that 1 in 160 children would have an ASD (WHO, 2019) and in 2020, it was also projected to soar to about 68.75% (WHO, 2021). In Indonesia, the number of children with Autism climbed to about 500 cases annually (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak [Kempppa], 2018).

The presence of an autistic child in the household leads to a variety of parental reactions, such as shock, confusion, anger, depression, and pessimism regarding the child's life in the future (Girli, 2018). Research conducted by Jiu and Rungreangkulkij

(2019) showed that an autistic child in the family could bring about stress on the main caregivers, financial problems, and changes in marital relationships. Concerning this, another study revealed that mothers of children with autism experienced stress (Jose et al., 2021). Parents of children with autism experience more difficult parenting situations and they feel more stress than those with down syndrome and non-disabled children (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016; Amireh, 2019). As a result, families with autistic children have a high risk of physical, psychological, and social problems (Jiu & Rungreangkulkij, 2019).

Most parents feel disappointed, unhappy, and even refuse the presence of the child (Topan et al., 2019). These kinds of feelings leads them to ignore their offspring (Hurlock, 2013). Algood et al. (2011) suggested that children with learning difficulties, mental disabilities, and emotional disorders have a great chance of being neglected by their parents. A research finding by Estugra (2019) on 204 parents of students from special needs school or Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB) section C in Jakarta, demonstrated, the levels of neglect in parents towards their child with intellectual disabilities (including children with ASD) is relatively high. In addition, parents in the medium category were about 131 parents (64.2%) and 31 parents (15.2%) were in the high category. Subsequently, 80.3% of parents indicated that their quality of relationship with their child decreased after receiving a diagnosis that their child had an ASD (Al-Kandari et al., 2017). A study by Ren and colleagues (2020) revealed that parents of children with ASD listen less attentively, lose their control more often, apply more physical control, and were less proactive and less supportive toward their children. However, the study by Pangestu (2021) identified that most parents of children with ASD had positive acceptance toward them. Jiu and Rungreangkulkij (2019) also found that one of the positive impacts for families with autistic children is to pay more attention and love them unconditionally. This reflected that parents' acceptance toward their children with ASD varies.

Rohner and Khaleque (2010) argued that parental acceptance is reflected by loving behavior, verbal and physical affection for their children, as well as warm interaction between them. Unconditional love is a form of parental acceptance towards children, which is reflected by giving attention, care, affection, also child's comfort by showing happiness (Al-Kandari et al., 2017). Parents of autistic children express their unconditional love in various ways, such as buying toys, food, going to the mall, or spending more time with them (Jiu & Rungreangkulkij, 2019). Ideally, parents give unconditional love toward their child regardless of the child's condition.

Parental acceptance contributes positively to psychological adjustment in children (Carrasco et al., 2019). Loving them conditionally may help parents and children to live life with a lower level of stress (Nandy, 2017). Showering children with unconditional love and accepting them as individuals also would increase life satisfaction (Jigyel, 2014). Unconditional love is one of the strategies for parents to overcome psychosocial problems encountered by their offspring (Macha et al., 2020). This encourages them to apply positive parenting systems to optimize the growth process of their youngsters (Purwaningrum et al., 2018). Guidance and support from a parent can facilitate children with ASD to move forward, socialize, live a better life, and make decisions independently (Singer & Wang, 2016). Furthermore, the parental rejection, identified by loss or lack of unconditional love, may bring them to ignore their child's conditions and needs. As a result, their growth and development are less optimal.

Parental acceptance, including parent unconditional love towards the presence of a child with ASD are influenced by several reasons, such as levels of care (Carlier et al., 2020), parental stress (Crum & Moreland, 2017), perceptions of social stigma, financial condition, quality of life (Al Khateeb et al., 2019), severity levels of ASD (Poslawsky et al., 2014), social support (Gusrianti et al., 2018; Janah & Susandari, 2017; Kandel & Merrick, 2007; Syaputra et al., 2018; Wijaksono, 2016) and religiosity (Desiningrum et al., 2020; Husna & Hamdan, 2020; Pangestu, 2021; Rahmawati, 2018). Poslawsky and his colleagues (2014) found, a mild level of ASD is associated with parental acceptance. Conversely, the results of meta- analysis research conducted by Yorke and colleagues (2018) showed that the severity levels of ASD were associated with parenting patterns, emotional, and behavioral problems in children with ASD and was positively related to parents' psychological distress. The level of deficiency of children with ASD is also correlated with the level of difficulty of a parent in nurturing and caring for them (Desiningrum et al., 2020; Karst & Hecke, 2012). This result was strengthened by another finding by Drogomyretska et al. (2020) which revealed that the severity level of ASD predicted parental stress. Similarly, Robinson and Weis (2020), found behavioral problems in children with ASD contributed to parental stress levels. Hence, based on the descriptions above, severity levels of ASD has been associated with difficulties in parenting along with parental stress, while factors associated with parents' unconditional love seemed very limited.

Religiosity is one of the factors that influence parents' unconditional love (Desiningrum et al., 2020; Pangestu, 2021; Rahmawati, 2018). Rahmawati (2018) found the more religious commitment parents stuck to, the more motivated they were to accept their child unconditionally. This represented that the commitment of parents was correlated with unconditional love for their children. Desiningrum and her colleagues' research also showed that parental religiosity was positively related to parental affection for their child with ASD. This was supported by another finding conducted by Pangestu (2021) which identified that parental religiosity contributes to parental acceptance towards their children with ASD.

Another research topic on the parent of children with ASD discovered that religiosity was correlated with maternal well-being (Faciane, 2015) and parents' quality of life (Al Khateeb et al., 2019) in which religiosity was one of the coping strategies. Ilias et al. (2018) suggested that religiosity could be a coping mechanism in taking care of children with ASD. Parents with a high level of religiosity believe that the presence of a child with ASD in their household is God's will so they must be tender in accepting them (Ilias et al., 2018). Religious beliefs can help parents accept and bring up children with ASD (Ilias et al., 2018). In contrast, Gusrianti and colleagues (2018) suggested that religiosity did not significantly affect parental acceptance, including parents' unconditional love. The difference in Gusrianti and colleagues' results are most likely determined by other factors, such as the severity level of ASD, which was not measured in the study. This current study aims to indicate the role of religiosity on parents' unconditional love directly when religiosity interacts with the severity level of ASD.

Social support plays a major role as an extrinsic coping resource and has positive implications for encouraging parents' unconditional love (Al-Kandari et al., 2017). The social support obtained can be a source of strength for parent to adjust their role of being a parent of a child with ASD and they are more likely to be resilient. It turned out that parent can love their children unconditionally, notwithstanding their condition. Social support is essential for a parents and families of individuals with ASD, such as reducing stress levels and increasing well-being (Marsack & Samuel, 2017).

Fitria (2019, conducting research on parents of children with special needs, including children with ASD, showed that social support did not contribute significantly to parental acceptance. This explains that the effectiveness of social support for parents of children with ASD varies. The effectiveness of social support is influenced by the quality of social support (Marsack & Samuel, 2017), sources of social support (Drogomyretska et al., 2020; Marsack-Topolewsky, 2020), type of disabilities (Alon, 2019), and subjective burden (Singh et al., 2017). Type of disabilities and subjective burden reflects severity levels of disabilities in children. Hence, the current study aims to prove the direct contribution of social support to parents' unconditional love as well as the effect of social support while interacting with severity levels of ASD on parents' unconditional love. This study also aims to prove the moderating effect of religiosity and social support on the relationship between severity levels of Autism and parents' unconditional love.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a quantitative approach with non-experimental research design to prove the relationship between variables but did not explain the cause-and-effect relationships (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018). This study aimed to investigate the severity level and parent's unconditional love moderated by religiosity and social support.

This study used a non-probability sampling approach by means of purposive sampling. The criteria of this research sample were parents who have children with ASD, aged 2 to 17 years old, both with complete or single parents. In this study, the data was collected online via google form. This process was started by asking for permission from parents with ASD to conduct research in several communities, growth and developmental clinics and special needs school in Jakarta.

The instruments of this study measured parents' unconditional love, the severity level of autism, religiosity, and social support. All scales used the Likert scale model. In this study, there were favorable and unfavorable items. The unconditional love items were divided into two. For the favorable items, response scores ranged from five (very suitable) to one (very unsuitable), whereas the unfavorable ones ranged from five (very unsuitable) to one (very suitable). Furthermore, the favorable items of the severity level of autism, religiosity and social support ranged from four (very suitable) to one (very unsuitable), whereas unfavorable ones ranged from four (very suitable) to one (very unsuitable).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, there were 200 parents of children with ASD who met the appropriate criteria for the research. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the study participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Parents' Genders			Monthly Income		
Male	36	18%	<Rp 1.000.000	36	18%
Female	164	82%	Rp 1.000.000 – Rp 3.000.000	42	21%
Parents' ages			Rp 3.000.000 – Rp 5.000.000	36	18%
20-30	11	5.5%	Rp 5.000.000 – Rp 7.000.000	19	9.5%
31-40	98	49%	>Rp.7.000.000	67	33.5%
41-50	82	41%	Children's Genders		
51-60	9	4.5%	Male	162	81%
Domiciles			Female	38	19%
Jakarta	60	30%	Children's Ages		
Banten	52	26%	2-10	121	60.5%
West Java	71	35.5%	11-17	79	39.5%
Central Java	4	2%			
East Java	5	2.5%			
South Sumatera	1	.5%			
West Sumatera	1	.5%			
Riau	1	.5%			
Riau Islands	1	.5%			
West Kalimantan	1	.5%			
East Kalimantan	2	1%			
South Sulawesi	1	.5%			

Table 1 shows that the study participants were dominated by females or mothers of children with ASD. According to Frye (2016) in his study, the number of fathers was less than mothers. That being said, both fathers and mothers had the same needs, such as the need for social support, either informational or emotional support, that could help them in caring for and educating their children. Sahida and Allenidekania (2018) discovered, there was no significant relationship between parent gender (father and mother) and parental rejection of the ASD child. This means that even though the number of fathers and mothers was not balanced, it will not cause bias in the results of the study. The gender of children with ASD is mainly males. These findings are in line with CDC (2020), where males experienced ASD five times more than females did (Kemenpppa, 2018).

The results of the statistical analysis shows that the level of severity of autism has a significant negative correlation with unconditional love, $b = -.162$; $t(196) = 2.849$, $p = .005$. This means, the higher the severity level of autism, the lower the unconditional love of the parents. This finding is in line with the results of Kandel and Merrick's (2007) research which showed that the level and type of children's disability affect parents' reactions. The results of research by Weiss and his colleagues (2012) showed, with the increase of behavioral problems of children with autism, the psychological acceptance of parents will decrease. Parents' perceptions about the severity level of their child's autism correlate with the level of stress experienced by the parents (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). The heavier the parents perceive the level of autism experienced by their children, the higher the stress level of the parents and the impact on the parents' unconditional love for their children.

Sarafino and Smith (2011) suggested that individuals who perceive that they do receive social support will feel loved, appreciated, and have a sense of belonging to a social group, making them more likely to cope with sources of stress and overcome their problems, compared to those who do not. Proper social support, such as providing the information needed by parents of children with ASD, may facilitate parents to identify and recognize their children better (Sarafino & Smith, 2011). Information and advice received by parents may help parents in caring for and nurturing their children. Hence, the informational support plays a significant role in constructing parental acceptance, such as unconditional love (Janah & Susandari, 2017). Emotional support, such as expressions of empathy, affection, positive appreciation, and motivation may increase parental unconditional love. This is consistent with the findings of Kandel and Merrick (2007) which showed that emotional support was effective in dealing with challenging situations (the presence of children with ASD) that were difficult for parents. The findings in the research by Alat (2017) indicated that the formation of a community of parents of autistic children could provide support, both informational support, sharing experiences and providing mutual support in overcoming drawbacks when caring for and accompanying their children, as well as emotional support. They could strengthen each other so that they could reduce feelings of helplessness and increase parental efficacy in caring for and educating their children (Alat, 2017; Wijksono, 2016). The findings of Wijksono (2016) suggested that various social supports can help parents accept their autistic child which is characterized by attention and affection, parent-child interaction and communication, and parental involvement.

The impact of social support interaction and severity level of autism on unconditional love is not statistically significant, $b = -.02$; $t(196) = .293$, $p = .770$. This finding differ from the research by Indiarti and Rahayu (2020) that mothers could accept autism in various conditions because of the social support they receive. The results of the research by Weiss et al., (2021) showed that the severity level of autism was positively related to the stress level of parents. Severity levels of autism correlate with the difficulty level of parents in caring for and caring for their children (Desiningrum et al., 2020; Karst & Hecke, 2012) and predict parental stress (Drogomyretska et al., 2020) as the social support is one of the external coping strategies. However, the findings of Weiss and colleagues (2021) showed that perceived social support from parents was negatively correlated with the severity level of autism. In fact, parents of ASD children with a severe level of autism require more social support. This is in line with the research by Khusaifan and El Keshky (2020), showing that social support could moderate the relationship between family stress and satisfaction at low- stress levels and moderate-stress levels but at high-stress levels, the moderating effect is not significantly. In this study, social support was also inconsequential to predict the relationship between severity level of autism and unconditional love of parents, $f^2 = .001$, $p = .770$. On top of that, the study conducted by Cuzzocrea and colleagues (2016) showed that in parents of children with high autism severity, social support did not function, or parents perceived the social support received was low. They feel dissatisfied with the help they receive (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). The social support received by parents of children with ASD is not strong enough to buffer the stress caused by their child's condition, thus preventing parents from giving unconditional love.

The results of statistical analysis showed that social support only had a direct effect on unconditional love, but social support could not significantly moderate the effect of the severity level of autism on unconditional love. The result of this statistical analysis is explained by looking at the contribution and effect size of social support to unconditional love, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The Coefficient of Determination and Effect Size towards Unconditional Love

Variable	R^2	Effect Size		Q^2
		f^2	p	
Severity Level of Autism	.026	.039	.005**	.293
Religiosity	.285	.379	.000***	.624
Social Support	.025	.033	.016*	.265
Moderating effect Religiosity	.062	.078	.001**	1,000
Moderating effect Social Support	.0004	.001	.770	1,000

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Hair et al. (2017) stated that it is difficult to determine the practical terms of the value due to the complexity of the model and the area of research. However, for convenience, R^2 of .25, .5 and .75 are classified as weak, medium, and substantial, respectively. An example of research explaining customer satisfaction and loyalty have a value of .2 is highly rated (Hair et al., 2017). In this study, religiosity has an R^2 value of .285 which could be considered high, while autism severity level and social support could be assessed as weak (see Table 2).

The effect size f^2 is used to assess the contribution of independent variables (severity level of autism) to the dependent variable (unconditional love), f^2 score of .02 is classified as small, .15 as moderate, and .35 as large (Hair et al., 2017). This study shows that autism severity level and social support has a small contribution to unconditional love, and religiosity has a large contribution to unconditional love (see Table 2). The moderating effect of religiosity is greater than the moderating effect of social support.

The Q^2 score is used to determine the predictive relevance of independent variables for dependent variables, provided that the Q^2 value is greater than zero (Hair et al., 2017). This study shows that autism severity level, religiosity, and social support are greater than zero. As a result, it might be concluded that all independent variables in this study, namely, autism severity level, religiosity, and social support, has predictive relevance for the dependent variable. The results of this study are shown in Table 2.

The results of the statistical analysis in Table 2 shows that the contribution of religiosity to unconditional love is high ($R^2 = .285$ or 28.5%) while the contribution of social support is low ($R^2 = .0246$ or 2.46%). The effect size of religiosity is great ($f^2 = .379$, $p = .000$) while the effect size of social support is small ($f^2 = .033$, $p = .016$). The moderating effect of religiosity is much higher and greater than the moderating effect of social support. It means that the interaction between religiosity and autism severity level is meaningful to predict unconditional love. On the other hand, the interaction of social support and autism severity level is inconsequential to predict unconditional love. This finding indicates that religiosity plays an important role in the construct of unconditional love for parents. However, it does not mean that social support has no role in the construct of unconditional love for parents since social support also has predictive relevance for unconditional love ($Q^2 = .265 > 0$). The contribution of social support is classified as weak, and the effect size is small since not all dimensions of social support were included in the statistical analysis. This is because none of the elements of the tangible and companionship dimensions meet the required statistical criteria. Whereas tangible support in the form of materials or services such as helping to care for or caring for children with ASD affects parental acceptance, including unconditional love (Wijaksono, 2016).

Another explanation regarding the finding of a moderating effect of social support on the relationship between the level of severity of autism and unconditional love is that social support is not always perceived and received correctly. According to Cuzzocrea and colleagues (2016), there are several things that make social support considered useful, including the type and quality of support, the person providing the support, and contextual problems. Parents can judge certain social support as a negative matter instead of reducing stress, it exacerbates stress and causes "social strain" (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). As the findings in the research of Elkfrawy and Ibrahim (2021) showed that social support was not correlated with unconditional love. Parents of children with autism experience chronic stress that can erode the support provided by the source of support from time to time. Sources of support do not realize how to provide appropriate assistance (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). As Sarafino and Smith (2011) stated that the support offered and available is not considered as being supportive. The reasons of this condition are the insufficient and inappropriate supports (Sarafino & Smith, 2011). The interaction of social support and autism severity level cannot predict unconditional love. The possibility is that the social support available and offered may not be sufficient or suitable enough to change the parents' perception of their child's autistic condition, thus parents still find it difficult to love their child unconditionally.

One of the limitations of this study is that some items cannot be included in the statistical analysis because the items do not fit the required criteria, which causes some unmeasurable dimensions of the independent variables. Therefore, future researchers are recommended to conduct a readability test before taking data. Another limitation is that participants in this study has a fairly wide age range from 2 to 17 years, which allows for differences in acceptance, including unconditional love due to the age of the child. The results of research by Sahida and Allenidekania (2018) showed that the age of the child was negatively correlated with

parental rejection. This reflects that parents' acceptance of their child's ASD diagnosis is a process that takes time (Poslawsky et al., 2014).

IV. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that unconditional parental love are influenced by the level of autism severity in a negative direction, religiosity in a positive direction, and social support in a positive direction. Parental religiosity may moderate the relationship between severity level of autism and unconditional love. This means that the religiosity of parents can reduce the effect of parental rejection of their autistic children. The religiosity of parents can maintain unconditional love for their children, but the role of social support is inconsequential in reducing the effect of parental rejection of their autistic children. The implication of this study is that parents of children with special needs are suggested to increase their religiosity. Providing information and emotional support may help parents develop unconditional love for their children.

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