

# The Importance of Social Support in Families with Children with Special Needs

Çiğdem Müge Haylı<sup>1</sup>

Mehmet Zeki Avcı<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Living with a child with special needs presents many challenges for families. During this process, families face numerous economic, psychological, emotional, and social challenges, and experience a heightened level of negative emotions. A social support system plays a crucial role in helping families feel less alone, overcome these challenges, and successfully adapt to the presence of a child with special needs. Providing social support for a child with special needs and their family is crucial for their healthy development and well-being in every aspect. Therefore, understanding the importance of a social support system in families with a child with special needs is crucial. This study first explains the importance of a social support system, the benefits it provides to families, and its impact.

## Introduction

The concept of family appears in various classifications within society. Each family has its own unique structure. Family types such as nuclear family, extended family, single-parent family, and others constitute the smallest unit of society. Having a child within the family life cycle marks the realization of parenthood.

The birth of a child brings about challenging processes and changes in the lives of parents. Parents wish for their child to be healthy. However, if a child is born with a disability, the family structure may be disrupted. This situation causes intense and complex emotions. The birth of a child with a

- 1 Associate Professor Doctor, Hakkari University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7630-9619, mail: mugehayli@hakkari.edu.tr
- 2 Professor Doctor, Cyprus Aydın University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6614-9447, mail: mehmetavci@cau.edu.tr

disability can affect family members socially and psychologically, while also creating financial difficulties (Köksal and Kabasakal, 2012).

The addition of a child with special needs to the family can create problems within the family structure. A child's disability can affect the family's mental health, social relationships, and economic situation, and it often poses challenges in coping with daily demands. In this case, social support is crucial for the family to cope with and mitigate the challenges they may face due to the child's special needs (Kumbasar, 2016).

### **Individuals with Special Needs**

According to the regulation, the concept of special needs is defined as the need for special services in education, health, environmental planning, economic and social rights in order to ensure equal participation in society compared to individuals without developmental or physical disabilities (Regulation on Special Needs Assessment for Children, 2019).

Binnet and Simon defined special needs from a medical perspective, calling them "abnormal children," as follows: "Any person who is clearly different from the average and exhibits pathological differences." In addition to this definition, individuals with disabilities are described as "those who cannot benefit from regular educational services due to mental or physical impairments" (Binnet and Simon, 1997).

Compared to typically developing children, children with special needs are those who differ in their learning abilities or physical characteristics. Therefore, they require special educational support services. Furthermore, the concept of special needs is not limited to disabilities; it also includes individuals who perform above the level of their peers (Akçamete, 2016).

### **Children with Special Needs**

There are individuals who develop differently from typically developing individuals and who benefit from general education services to a limited extent or not at all. This condition, formerly referred to as a disability but now described as a special need due to its less stigmatizing nature, is defined as the inability or limited ability of an individual to perform roles expected of them based on age, gender, social, and cultural factors due to their disability (Köksal and Erciyes, 2021).

In Turkey, students with special needs are classified according to the Special Education Services Regulation (Special Education Services, 2006). According to the regulation, the classifications are as follows: intellectual

disabilities, hearing impairments, visual impairments, orthopedic impairments, disabilities resulting from nervous system damage, language and speech disorders, specific learning disabilities, multiple disabilities, emotional and behavioral adjustment difficulties, chronic illnesses, autism spectrum disorders, social adjustment difficulties, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and giftedness or special talents.

### **Classification of Children with Special Needs**

Akçamete (2016) explains that the Individuals with Special Needs Education Act (IDEA), enacted in the United States, identifies 16 disability classes, each with its own specific characteristics. These groups include intellectual disability, specific learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), gifted individuals, multiple disabilities, developmental delays, emotional and behavioral disorders, vision loss, hearing impairment, orthopedic impairment, visual impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, and other health problems (chronic illnesses).

### **Social Support**

Social support, in general, is effective in helping individuals confront and cope with problems they may encounter in their lives. Social support is an important support that protects individuals against the negative effects of life. It also has a positive impact on an individual's life (Baltaş 2000; Mahon et al., 1998). Social support is a multidimensional construct that, in addition to deriving satisfaction from different support sources, also refers to the number of support sources required for the family. These types of support can be grouped under two general headings: Emotional Support and Instrumental Support (Kaner, 2003; Marcenko et al., 1991).

Emotional support involves listening and, depending on the circumstances, can be equally or even more important than instrumental support. The presence of confidants—those with whom individuals can talk and share their personal problems and private matters—provides strength to endure difficulties arising from short- or long-term challenges. It provides comfort by giving them the feeling that they are not alone, that they are important and valued. It satisfies individuals' need for close relationships and being with others, thereby reducing or preventing stress (Kaner, 2003). Instrumental support, also called informational or material support, includes providing information, advice, feedback, financial and material assistance, assistance with care and education, and the like. It helps recognize, understand, and cope with problematic situations. It provides individuals with information

about disability-related services, institutions, resources, and laws, providing ways to cope with problematic situations. It reduces tension by providing direct solutions to financial problems or providing family members with the necessary time to relax and participate more in leisure activities (Kaner, 2003). High-quality, accessible, and practical information—whether formal or informal—serves as a family-friendly resource.

The social support an individual receives from family members, especially close friends and their immediate environment, is crucial in solving problems they may encounter (Kaşıkçı et al. 2009). The most important sources of social support for an individual are family, friends within the institution, and people they respect (Yıldırım, 1998). Social support is viewed as a multifaceted concept, encompassing not only information and advice but also emotional support (Cutrona & Russell, 1987).

### **Why is Social Support Important for Families with Special Needs?**

Social support acts as a protective factor in reducing mental health problems, acting as a catalyst for individuals to solve problems and adapt to their environment in a balanced and healthy way, thus preserving their mental health (Özdemir, 2013). When individuals have reliable support systems (such as relatives and friends), they can manage the uncertainties caused by stress-inducing factors, be active in their environment, and their sense of self-control increases (Semerci, 2016).

While social support does not completely eliminate anxiety, it alleviates anxiety levels and enables individuals to be more optimistic, more self-controlled, and more willing to explore new coping strategies when dealing with stress (Baltaş, 2007). Adequate support systems play a key role in ensuring the well-being of families of children with special needs (Allen and Cowdery, 2005). Parents of children with special needs are most likely to receive support from close relatives, particularly their spouses, mothers, and siblings, while support from friends is reported to be limited. Some parents even report having no one to turn to for help (Yurdakul and Girli, 1999).

Fereidouni et al. (2021) concluded that the quality of life of mothers of children with special needs is lower than that of mothers of typically developing children. Ekas et al. (2010) also found that mothers who received social support experienced increased optimism. Yüksel and Tanrıverdi (2019) emphasized the need for families to be supported with multifaceted social programs to cope with social isolation and exclusion. Aktürk (2012) concluded that parents' inability to accept their children's conditions, their perceived blame, and feelings of anxiety and shame reduce their problem-

solving skills, leading to social isolation. Lu, Yang, Skora, Wang, Cai, Sun and Li (2015) demonstrated in their study that the mental, physical, and social support received by parents of children with special needs who are at risk will improve their quality of life (Özdemir, 2025).

Studies on families with children with special needs have demonstrated the effects of social support in various ways. For example, Konstantareas and Homatidis (1989) reported that mothers of autistic children primarily seek spousal support and often require informal support sources. Specifically, they stated that mothers want their husbands to: a) take responsibility for the autistic child and provide them with some comfort, b) take a greater role in the child's development and education, and c) help them with daily tasks. This finding suggests that mothers, who are generally responsible for the child's care, experience higher stress levels than their husbands due to spending more time with the child and lacking spousal support (as cited in Boyd, 2002).

Similarly, Duarte, Bordin, Yazgı, and Money (2005) reported that social support has a reducing effect on the stress levels of mothers of autistic children. A study by Gray and Holden (1992) found that parents of autistic children who received more social support had lower levels of depression, anxiety, and worry. They also noted that mothers receiving less social support had negative effects on their children by preventing them from participating in stress-reducing social activities, and that mothers actually sought support primarily from their spouses. A study by Krauss (1993) also found that social support contributed to the reduction of mothers' stress (as cited in Ünlü and Gökler, 2021).

Hadadian (1994) found that mothers who received support from their spouses developed better emotional relationships with their children. The study found that as the amount of actual support received from family and friends decreased, perceived stress levels increased.

Dunst, Trivette, and Cross (1986) conducted a study with 137 parents with developmental delays, intellectual disabilities, and physical disabilities, finding that parents who were satisfied with their social support networks developed more positive attitudes toward their children and were more positive in their spousal relationships.

Sencar (2007) also examined the relationship between perceived social support and stress levels of mothers of autistic children. He found that no one else was the primary source of social support for families with autistic

children. The primary sources of support were spouses, siblings, mothers, children, fathers, and relatives.

Hisoğlu (2018), in his study with families of children with autism, found that social support had an impact on parents' life satisfaction and depression levels. He found that families receiving social support from sources such as spouses, friends, etc. experienced lower levels of depression and greater life satisfaction.

Similarly, Erbilir Gönültaş (2019) conducted a study with families of children with autism and found that providing parents with adequate social support led to positive improvements in their quality of life.

In his study, "The Impact of Social Support Received by Families with Autistic Children on Social Integration," Atlı (2019) stated that the social support received by families with autistic children is insufficient, and that families believe that social support is absolutely essential for the progress of autism. He also stated that the social support provided for autism is not sufficient for social integration and that services need to be improved.

As studies have shown, the social support received by families of children with autism is crucial for their development, well-being, and social integration. Families are strengthened by all forms of emotional, psychological, cognitive, material, and spiritual support they receive from their environment regarding the care and development of their children. This support has been observed to have a positive impact on their lives and overall well-being. The presence of social support reduces the pressure, stress, and even the risk of exposure to violence that families may experience due to autism, while also facilitating a more positive social integration process (Ünlü and Gökler, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

Meeting the social support needs of families is crucial for helping them confront their challenges. This is because the isolation of those responsible for childcare from society, combined with the feelings of guilt they experience, restricts parents' social interactions and confines them to their inner worlds. The support and encouragement parents receive from their social environment can alleviate these feelings of guilt and anxiety. Parents who perceive themselves as active participants in social life are more likely to engage in their children's development, rather than withdrawing into isolation.

## References

- Akçamete, G. (2016). Özel Eğitime Başlangıç. G. Akçamete, Genel Eğitim Okullarında Özel Gereksinimi Olan Öğrenciler ve Özel Eğitim (S. 35-38). Ankara: Kök Yayıncılık.
- Aktürk, Ü. (2012). Engelli çocuğu olan anne-babaların kaygı düzeyi ve başa çıkma stratejilerinin değerlendirilmesi. Yüksek Lisans Tezi. İnönü Üniversitesi, Sağlık Bilimleri Enstitüsü, Malatya.
- Allen, K. E., Cowdery, E. G. (2005). The Exceptional Child: Inclusion in Early Childhood Education. United States: Thomson Delmar Learning.
- Atlı, A. (2019). Otizmlı Çocuğa Sahip Ailelerin Aldıkları Sosyal Desteğin Toplumsal Entegrasyonlarına Etkisi. Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Üsküdar Üniversitesi, Sağlık Bilimleri Enstitüsü, Sosyal Hizmet Anabilim Dalı, İstanbul.
- Baltaş, Z. (2000). Sağlık Psikolojisi. Remzi Kitabevi, İstanbul, 133-165.
- Baltaş, Z. (2007). Sağlık Psikolojisi. Halk Sağlığında Davranış Bilimleri. İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi.
- Binnet, A., Simon, T. (1997). Anormal Çocuklar. (S. E. Siyavuşgil, Çev.) İstanbul Devlet Basım Evi.
- Boyd, B. A. (2002). Examining the Relationship Between Stress and Lack of Social Support in Mothers of Children with Autism. Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 17(4): 208–215.
- Cutrona, C. E., Russell, D. W. (1987). The provisions of social relationships and adaptation to stress. Advances in personal relationships, 1(1): 37-67.
- Duarte, C. S., Bordin, I. A., Yazigi, L., Mooney, J. (2005). Factors associated with stress in mothers of children with autism. Autism, 9(4): 416–427.
- Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., Cross, A. H. (1986). Mediating influences of social support: Personal, family, and child outcomes. American Journal of Mental Deficiency, 90: 403–417.
- Ekas, N. V., Lickenbrock, D. M., Whitman, T. L. (2010). Optimism, social support, and well-being in mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 40(10): 1274-1284.
- Erbilir Gönültaş, S.G. (2019). Zihinsel Engelli Çocuğa Sahip Olan Ebeveynlerin Bakım Yükü, Sosyal Destek Düzeyleri ve Yaşam Kalitesi Arasındaki İlişkinin İncelenmesi. Yüksek Lisans Tezi. Manisa Celal Bayar Üniversitesi, Sağlık Bilimleri Enstitüsü, Sosyal Hizmet Anabilim Dalı, Manisa.
- Fereidouni, Z., Kamyab, A.H., Dehghan, A. (2021). A comparative study on the quality of life and resilience of mothers with disabled and neurotypically developing children in Iran. Heliyon: 7(6).



- Gray, D. E. ve Holden, W. J. (1992). Psychosocial well-being among the parents of children with autism. *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 18: 83-93.
- Hadadian, A. (1994). Stress and social support in fathers and mothers of young children with and without disabilities. *Early Education and Development*, 5: 226-235.
- Hisoğlu, A. (2018). Otizm Spektrum Bozukluğu Tanılı Çocukların Ebeveynlerinde Algılanan Sosyal Destek ve Problem Çözme Becerilerinin Yaşam Doyumuna Etkisi. Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Üsküdar Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Klinik Psikoloji Anabilim Dalı, İstanbul.
- Kaner, S. (2003). Aile Destek Ölçeği: Faktör Yapısı, Güvenirlilik ve Geçerlik Çalışmaları. *Özel Eğitim Dergisi*, 4(1): 57-72.
- Kanun, S. (2005). Engelliler Hakkında Kanun. Kabul Tarihi, 1(7).
- Kaşıkcı, M., Çoban, G. İ., Ünsal, A., Avşar, G. (2009). Üniversite son sınıf öğrencilerinde aileden ve arkadaştan algılanan sosyal destek ve benlik saygısı. *Florence Nightingale Journal of Nursing*, 17(3): 158-165.
- Köksal, G., Kabasakal, Z. (2012). Zihinsel Engelli Çocukları Olan Ebeveynlerin Yaşamlarından Algıladıkları Stresi Yordayan Faktörlerin İncelenmesi. *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Buca Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, (32): 71-91.
- Köksal, M., Erciyes, J. C. (2021). Otizm tanısı almış çocukların ailelerinde görülen psiko-sosyal sorunların değerlendirmesi (Doctoral dissertation, İstanbul Aydın University).
- Konstantareas, M. M., Homatidis, S. (1989). Assessing child symptom severity and stress in parents of autistic children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 30(3): 459-470.
- Krauss, M. W. (1993). Child-related and parenting stress: Similarities and differences between mothers and fathers of children with disabilities. *American Journal of Mental Retardation*, 97: 393-404.
- Kumbasar, A. (2016). İtme Engelli ve Engelli Olmayan Çocuklara Sahip Ailelerde Sosyal Destek Algısı, Yılmazlık ve Tükenmişlik Düzeylerinin İncelenmesi. (Yayımlanmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi), Hacettepe Üniversitesi Sağlık Bilimleri Enstitüsü. Özel Eğitim Programı.
- Lu, M., Yang, G., Skora, E., Wang, G., Cai, Y., Sun, Q., Li, W. (2015). Self-esteem, social support, and life satisfaction in Chinese parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 17: 70-77.
- Mahon, N. E., Yarcheski, A., Yarcheski, T. J. (1998). Social support and positive health practices in young adults: Loneliness as a mediating variable. *Clinical Nursing Research*, 7(3): 292-308.



- Marcenko, M. O. and Meyers, J. C. (1991). Mothers of Children with Developmental Disabilities: Who Shares the Burden? *Family Relations*. (40): 186-190.
- Özdemir, M.B. (2025). Özel Gereksinimli Çocuğa Sahip Ebeveynlerin Sosyal Destek ve Yaşam Boyu Öğrenme Gereksinimleri. *International Journal of Social and Humanities Sciences (IJSHS)*, 9(1): 87-106
- Özdemir, O. (2013). Ailelerin Danışmanlık, Rehberlik ve Eğitim Gereksinimlerinin Karşılanması. A. Cavkaytar (Ed.), *Özel eğitimde aile eğitimi ve rehberliği içinde* (3. Baskı, ss. 178-204). Ankara: Vize Yayıncılık.
- Resmî Gazete, 20 Şubat 2019 Çarşamba, Sayı: 30692.
- Semerci, M. (2016). Lise son öğrencilerinin riskli sağlık davranışları ve algılanan sosyal destek ilişkisi. Yüksek Lisans Tezi. Erzincan Üniversitesi, Sağlık Bilimleri Enstitüsü.
- Sencar, B. (2007) Otistik Çocuğa Sahip Ailelerin Algıladıkları Sosyal Destek ve Stres Düzeyleri Arasındaki İlişkinin İncelenmesi. Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, İzmir.
- Ünlü, İ., Gökler, R. (2021). Otizmli çocuğa sahip ailelerde sosyal destek sisteminin önemi. *Tıbbi Sosyal Hizmet Dergisi*, (18): 194-215.
- Yıldırım, İ. (2016). Akademik başarı düzeyleri farklı olan lise öğrencilerinin bazı değişkenlere göre sosyal destek düzeyleri. *Türk Psikolojik Danışma ve Rehberlik Dergisi*, 2(10).
- Yüksel, H., Tanrıverdi, A. (2019). Özel gereksinimli çocuğa sahip olan ailelerin yaşadıkları sosyal sorunlar ve baş etme yolları. *Ankara Üniversitesi Eğitim Bilimleri Fakültesi Özel Eğitim Dergisi*, 20(3): 535-559.
- Yurdakul, A., Girli, A. (1999). Engelli çocuğu olan ailelerin sosyal destek örüntüleri ve bunun psikolojik sağlıkla ilişkisi. *İlkışık Dergisi*.