

Parental Anxiety among Parents of Children with Special Needs: A Systematic Review of Contributing Factors

Ismiyanti^{1*}, IGAA Noviekayati², Suhadianto³

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Ismiyanti ismiyanti.yulian@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Children with special needs require extra parental attention to support their optimal growth and development. Children with special needs have many weaknesses in terms of physical, mental, emotional and social so that it often triggers anxiety of their parents. Anxiety of parents of children with special needs occurs because of the hope that children can grow and develop normally like children in general. This study aims to systematically review the factors causing anxiety of parents of children with special needs. This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method using PRISMA guidelines with a total of 20 articles reviewed. The search database through Google Scholar, Scopus and Semantic Scholar with English keywords "parent of children with disabilities AND anxiety AND risk factors OR determinant OR predictor." The journal search criteria are based on the years 2020-2025, participation of parents of children with special needs and the use of English and Indonesian. The results of the study indicate that there are several factors that cause anxiety in parents who have children with special needs, including parental expectations, feelings of failure to meet demands, burden of responsibility, low quality of life, not understanding children's needs, family conditions, tense relationships between families, difficulty dividing time with family, depression, stress, mental and emotional exhaustion, lack of social support, fear of being left behind in terms of education, type of disability, witnessing children's challenges and limitations, physical health and mental burden of parents.

INTRODUCTION

Every child is born with unique characteristics. Some children are born perfectly normal, while others are born with disabilities. Children born with disabilities will experience physical, mental, intellectual, social, and emotional developmental issues throughout their lives. Children with disabilities are referred to as children with special needs, meaning they require special attention (Alurmei et al., 2024). According to Law No. 8 of 2016 concerning children with special needs or disabilities, a person with disabilities is any person who experiences long-term physical, intellectual, mental, and/or sensory limitations, which can hinder and hinder their ability to participate fully and effectively with other citizens based on equal rights.

Children with special needs require extra parental attention to support their optimal growth and development. In this regard, parents' role is crucial in understanding the issues and needs of children with special needs. Not all parents understand how to educate children with special needs, often considering them a burden due to their limitations (Afidah et al., 2022). Children with special needs have numerous physical, mental, emotional, and social weaknesses, which often trigger parental anxiety.

Parents of children with special needs experience anxiety due to their expectation that their children will grow and develop normally, like other children, even though the reality is that their condition may not be the same as other children. Parents' demands regarding their children's growth and development are often not based on sufficient understanding, resulting in anxiety (Nasir et al., 2018). Anxiety is an unpleasant subjective experience characterized by feelings of anxiety, tension, and emotion (Ghufron & Risnawita, 2017). A child's growth and development are closely linked to the role of their parents, so parents play a significant role in meeting their physical and mental needs (Gayatina, et al., 2025). Anxiety can negatively impact parents through a lack of attention and affection, thus reducing the child's ability to grow and develop.

Anxiety is the most common feeling experienced by parents of children with special needs. Research conducted by Muhammad Elang Ramadhan et al. (2025) found that parents are prone to anxiety in parenting, due to a lack of experience and lack of mental preparation. Anxiety often occurs in relatively young parents, between 21 and 30 years old. Another study conducted by Gidion et al. (2025) found that anxiety among parents of children with special needs is related to marital status. Parents who are legally married have lower levels of anxiety because they have the support of their partners in managing their anxiety.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research examined the picture of anxiety of parents of children with special needs in general, the correlation of anxiety with various variables such as parenting patterns, parental knowledge, and other variables that may be related, anxiety of parents of children with special needs specifically such as anxiety related to the future of children, anxiety related to children's careers,

anxiety related to children's education and so on. Previous research related to anxiety of children with special needs, none of which has examined the anxiety of parents of children with special needs using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method.

Researchers used the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method because this method emphasizes strong evidence that can minimize bias in traditional literature reviews. Using clearly documented structured stages and literature selection filtered using explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to avoid bias in journal sample selection and can summarize tens to hundreds of scientific journals to draw one large, credible conclusion. The purpose of using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method is to find out a Systematic Review of the Factors Causing Anxiety of Parents of Children with Special Needs.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, a structured and transparent approach to collect, critically examine, integrate, and compile the results of various previous research studies to answer specific questions. This method can identify trends, developments, and research gaps on a topic and can prevent subjectivity in literature selection. This research consisted of several stages: question formulation, literature search in scientific databases, selection using inclusion and exclusion criteria, data extraction, and research conclusions.

This study used the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, which are guidelines used for transparent reporting standards for conducting systematic literature reviews (SLR). The PRISMA flow diagram was carried out in several stages: identifying articles from databases using keywords, selecting articles, fulfilling research inclusion and exclusion criteria, and determining the final number of articles eligible for review.

Researchers searched for articles on the topic of anxiety among parents of children with special needs. The population used was parents of children with special needs, with exposure to anxiety and outcome factors contributing to the study. Four criteria were used in selecting articles. The first criterion was the relevance of the research topic, which was analyzed through the title and abstract to identify causal factors. The second criterion was publication within the last five years (2020-2025), tailored to the research needs and ensuring the relevance of the content. The third criterion was research participation, with participants being parents of children with special needs. The fourth criterion was the use of English or Indonesian.

The article search was conducted using the Publish or Perish application using Google Scholar, Scopus, and Semantic Scholar databases for the period 2020-2025 and through comparisons with five countries. To find related articles, researchers used the English keywords "parent of children with disabilities AND anxiety AND risk factors OR determinant OR predictor." Searching for articles using English keywords aimed to obtain a wider range of articles. Based on the search results using the Publish or Perish application, (1,046) articles were found

from three databases, namely Google Scholar (997), Scopus (17), and Semantic Scholar (32). The next step was to save the selected articles to the Mendeley application to detect data duplication in the collected articles. The final result was 20 articles. After reviewing the title, abstract, and four specified criteria, 1,026 articles were eliminated because they did not meet the criteria of topic relevance, respondent characteristics, language use, and suitability for research objectives. Thus, the analysis continued with seven articles that met all these criteria. The article selection process was carried out according to the PRISMA steps described in Figure 1.

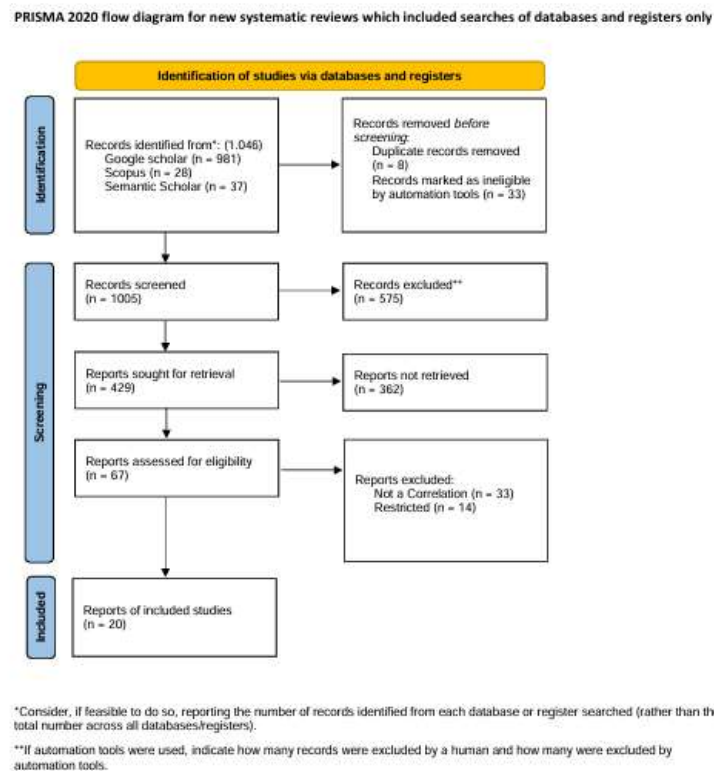


Figure 1. Article selection process with PRISMA diagram

The analysis was conducted narratively to summarize, analyze, and explain the findings of the various studies using three stages. The first stage began by reading the entire article to understand the topic, objectives, and outcomes. In the second stage, the researchers extracted the data and summarized it in a table containing information about the authors, research objectives, methods used, participant characteristics, data collection techniques, and key findings of each article. The third stage was an in-depth analysis of the summarized data to evaluate the factors contributing to anxiety among parents of children with special needs.

RESEARCH RESULT

The article search process is carried out using assistance *publish or perish* which were then analyzed using Mendeley. Articles were searched through three websites, namely Google Scholar (981), Scopus (28), and Semantic Scholar (37). From these three websites, 1,046 articles were found. These articles were then

analyzed using Mendeley. 1,005 articles were detected in Mendeley, with details of 575 articles not in accordance with the selected topic and the remaining 429 articles in line with the research topic. After further analysis using the keywords parent of children with disabilities AND anxiety, 67 articles remained that matched the keywords. The researcher analyzed the articles one by one and found 33 articles that did not match the research topic and 14 articles that were locked. So that the articles that could be analyzed were 20 articles.

The 20 articles that were further analyzed met several characteristic requirements, including: Participants were parents of children with special needs, in the 2020-2025 period, articles came from at least five countries and contained factors causing anxiety among parents of children with special needs.

Based on the analysis of 20 articles, it was found that anxiety among parents of children with special needs is caused by a variety of factors. A summary of the article findings is presented in the following table.

Table 1. Synthesis of research findings

Author, Year, Title	Objective	Method	Sample	Data Collection Technique	Results
Oladimeji, Et Al (2021) - The Impact Of Parental Attitudes And Practices Toward Children With Special Needs In Oyo State (Oyo State, Nigeria)	To Explore The Impact Of Parental Attitudes Towards Children With Special Needs	Analysis Of The Impact Of Attitudes And Behavior Using	25 Parents Of Childre n With Special Needs	Parental Attitude Scale	The Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Is Due To Their Expectations Of Their Children Being Perfect And Failing To Meet Realistic Demands On Their Children.
Udeme, Et Al., (2021) - Quality Of Life Of Mothers Of Children With Intellectual	To Determine The Influence Of Social Support, Maternal Stress And Socioecon	Influence Analysis	93 Mothers Of Childre n With Special Needs	Predictors Of Mother's Quality Of Life (Pmql) And Family Quality Of Life Scale	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Changes In Family Structure Which Reduces The

Disability: Do Social Support, Maternal Stress And Socio Economic Status Play A Role? (South Africa)	omic Status On The Quality Of Life Of Mothers Of Children With Special Needs.				Mother's Quality Of Life
Kannur, Et Al., (2025) - Determinants Of Mental Health Among Parents Of Children With Disabilities (India)	Identifying Factors That Influence The Mental Health Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs	Quantitative Research	240 Parents And 120 Children With Disabilities	Anxiety And Stress Scale (Dass)	Anxiety Among Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To High Levels Of Depression And Stress Experienced By Parents
Dr. Archana, Et Al., (2025) - Family Dynamics , Community Support, And Psychological Distress Among Parents Of Persons With Disabilities (India)	Looking At The Family Dynamics Of Parents Of People With Disabilities	Quantitative Research	300 Parents Of Children With Disabilities	The Family Environment Scale, Community Support Scale, And Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Tense Family Relationships That Make Parents Feel Stressed

Lina Lago Et Al, (2025) - Parenting Under Pressure: Raising School-Age Children With Disabilities During A Pandemic In Sweden (Sweden)	Providing Knowledge About School Practices For Children With Special Needs During The Covid-19 Pandemic	Qualitative Study	23 Parents Of 26 Students With Special Needs	Interview	Parents Of Children With Special Needs Are Anxious Because They Feel They Are Being Left Behind In Their Education.
Karim Savari, Et Al., (2021) - Evaluating The Role Of Perceived Stress, Social Support, And Resilience In Predicting The Quality Of Life Among The Parents Of Disabled Children (Iran)	Evaluating The Role Of Stress, Social Support And Resilience In Predicting Quality Of Life In Parents And Children	Quantitative	250 Volunteers	World Health Organization Quality Of Life Questionnaire-Short Form, The Perceived Stress Scale (Pss), The Multidimensional Scale Of Perceived Social Support, And The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Cd-Risc)	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Lack Of Social Support, Shame, Inability To Adapt To Stress
Havva, Et Al., (2021) - Attitudes	Examining Death Anxiety In Parents	Cross-Sectional And	382 Parents With Childre	Interview	The Level Of Anxiety About Death Of Parents Of

Promoting Coping With Death Anxiety Among Parents Of Children With Disabilities (Türkiye)	Of Children With Special Needs	Descriptive Approach	n With Severe Disabilities		Children With Special Needs Due To Psychodemographics, Such As External Support, Type Of Disability, And Beliefs Related To Death
Michelle, Et Al., (2020) - Parents' Attendance, Participation And Engagement In Children's Developmental Rehabilitation Services: Part 1. Contextualizing The Journey To Child Health And Happiness (Canada)	Family-Centered Developmental Rehabilitation Approach	<i>Grounded Theory Study</i>	20 Parents (15 Mothers, 5 Fathers)	Interview	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To The Demands Of Raising Children And The Burden Of Responsibility Related To Care And Therapy
Helen, Et Al., (2021) - Fathers Of Children With A Disability: Health, Work,	Investigating Fathers' Perspectives On Childcare And Family Life,	Quantitative	25 Participants	Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (Dass); Health Promoting Activities	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To The Difficulty Of Balancing Time With Family,

And Family Life Issues	Work, And Health.			Scale (Hpas-M); Fathers Of Children With Developmental Challenges (Fcdc) Scale.	Career And Caring For Children With Special Needs
Alma, Et AL., (2020) – Family Quality Of Life: Perceptions Of Parents Of Children With Developmental Disabilities In Bosnia And Herzegovina (Balkan Peninsula)	Assessing The Quality Of Life Of Families With Children With Disabilities	Qualitative Descriptive	270 Participants	Interview	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Because The Parents Have A Low Quality Of Life
Stacy, Et AL., (2021) – Understanding Mental Health Outcomes Related To Compassion Fatigue In Parents Of Children Diagnosed With	Analyzing Empathy Fatigue In Parents With Intellectual Disabilities	Qualitative Phenomenological	25 Participants	Interview	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Emotional Exhaustion Resulting From Receiving A Diagnosis Of Children With Special Needs

Intellectual Disability (Usa)					
Jabeen, Et Al., (2024) - Impact On Family Functioning, Social Support And Psychological Distress In Parents Of Children With Intellectual Disability (Pakistan)	Exploring The Relationship Of Impact On Family Functioning, Social Support	Correlational	100 Parents	Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, The Family Impact Questionnaire, Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale	The Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Not Getting Support From Family, Friends And Society Due To Stigma
Jill, Et Al., (2025) - Barriers And Facilitators To Parent-Delivered Interventions For Children With Or Infants At Risk Of Cerebral Palsy. An Integrative Review Informed By Behavior Change Theory (Uk)	Identify Barriers And Enabling Factors In Parent-Delivered Interventions And Suggest Improvements To Practices Guided By Behavior Change Models.	Quantitative Study	34 Respondents	Behavioral Therapy	The Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Taking On The Role Of Therapist And Parent

Sanja, Et Al., (2020) - Parenting Sense Of Competence In Parents Of Children With And Without Intellectual Disability (Croatia)	Examining The Relationship Between Children's Intellectual Disabilities, Parental Education, Employment, And Stress	Quantitative	107 Participants	Parenting Sense Of Competence Scale, Perceived Stress	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Lack Of Support From Others And Work
Goswami, Ak, (2023) - Parental Stress: An Analysis Of Empirical Evidence For Parents Of Intellectually Disabled Children- A Systematic Review (India)	Examining The Dimensions Of Parental Stress With Well-Being	Systematic Review (Sr)	12 Articles	Systematic Review (Sr)	The Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Witnessing Their Child's Challenges And Limitations
Chairijah, Et Al., (2024) - Parental Factors Related To Covid-19 Prevention Behavior	To Determine The Influence Of Knowledge, Attitudes, Intentions , Subjectiv	Correlational Descriptive	100 Parents	Instrument	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Lack Of Social Support

In Children With Intellectual Disability: Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (Indonesia)	e Norms, And Social Support On Covid-19 Prevention Behavior In Parents Of Children With Intellectual Disabilities.				
Bokalial, Et Al., (2020) - Effectiveness Of Community-Based Rehabilitation On The Lives Of Parents Of Children With Cerebral Palsy: A Mixed Method Study In Karnataka , India (Bangladesh)	Identifying The Effects Of Cbr Programs On Parents Of Children With Cerebral Palsy	Mix Method	100 Parents	Cbr Program	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Challenges, Physical Health And Mental Burden
Brian, Et Al. (2024) - Prevalence Of Common	Analyzing Data On Special Needs Children With	Descriptive Study	6078 Respondents	Electronic Medical Record	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Lack

Disease Condition s In A Large Cohort Of Individual s With Down Syndrome In The United States (Usa)	Down Syndrom e				Of Social Support
Guney Et Al (2023) - Perceived Parenting Skills That Immigran t Parents Of Children With A Disability, During The Covid-19 Pandemic	Perceived Abilities Of Immigran t Parents Of Children With Disabiliti es During The Pandemic	Quantitativ e	50 Parents	Family Adjustmen t Scale (Pafas)	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Not Understandin g Their Child's Needs And Fear Of Education
Brekke, Et Al., (2023) - The Health Of Mothers Caring For A Child With A Disability: A Longitudi nal Study (Norway)	Examinin g The Relations hip Between Child Disability And Five Maternal Health Indicators .	Longitudin al Study	Parents Of Childre n Born In 2009 - -2015	Experiment	Anxiety Of Parents Of Children With Special Needs Due To Having Health Problems Before Giving Birth

DISCUSSION

Research by Oladimeji et al. (2021) indicates that anxiety among parents of children with special needs is caused by internal factors within the parents,

where parents place expectations on their children to be perfect and fail to meet the realistic demands placed on them by having a child with special needs. Meanwhile, research by Michelle et al. (2020) indicates that parental anxiety arises from the demands of raising children and the burden of responsibilities related to care and therapy. Research by Alma et al. (2020) indicates that parental anxiety arises from a low quality of life, leading to anxiety when having a child with special needs. Research by Guney et al. (2023) indicates that anxiety arises from parents' lack of understanding of the needs of children with special needs. Research by Brekke et al. (2023) indicates that parental anxiety arises from parents' previous health problems before giving birth.

Meanwhile, research conducted by Udeme et al (2021) shows that the factors causing anxiety in parents of children with special needs are due to This is due to family circumstances, where the mother's quality of life declines due to structural changes within the family. This is in line with research by Dr. Archana et al. (2025), which shows that anxiety among parents of children with special needs is caused by strained relationships within the family, which leads to stress for the parents. Research by Helen et al. (2021) shows that parents often find it difficult to balance family time, careers, and caring for children with special needs, which triggers anxiety.

Research by Kannur et al. (2025) indicates that the cause of anxiety in parents of children with special needs is the parents' mental state, which can lead to depression and stress. Meanwhile, research by Stacy et al. (2021) states that anxiety is often caused by emotional exhaustion. Research by Jill et al. (2025) indicates that parental anxiety occurs due to exhaustion in their roles as both parents and therapists for children with special needs.

Research by Karim Savari et al (2021) shows that the factors causing anxiety in parents of children with special needs are caused by social factors, where parents lack support from their social environment, feel embarrassed in social circles so they are unable to adapt to stress. Meanwhile, research by Jabeen et al. (2024) states that parental anxiety arises from a lack of support from family, friends, and the community. Research by Sanja et al. (2020) indicates that parental anxiety arises from a lack of social support and work demands. This aligns with research by Chairijah et al. (2024) and Brian et al. (2024), which indicates that parental anxiety arises from a lack of social support.

Research by Lina Lago et al. (2025) shows that anxiety among parents of children with special needs is caused by parents feeling that their children will fall behind in education. Meanwhile, research by Havva et al. (2021) shows that anxiety levels are influenced by demographic factors such as external support, type of disability, and beliefs related to death. Research by Goswami (2023) shows that parental anxiety arises from witnessing the challenges and limitations experienced by children with special needs. Research by Bokalia et al. (2020) shows that anxiety among parents of children with special needs arises from challenges, physical health, and mental burden.

Previous research has examined the anxiety of parents of children with special needs. Research by Insani et al. (2021) suggests that anxiety often arises from narrow parental perceptions, unpleasant experiences, and pessimism about

their child's abilities. Anxiety can also be influenced by maturity, education, age, and gender. Mature parents are more likely to avoid anxiety, as higher education influences their thinking, allowing them to more easily reduce stress. Anxiety also often arises when considering their future and careers, and this anxiety is manifested through emotional, cognitive, and physiological reactions. Emotional reactions typically include irritability. Cognitive reactions typically include fear of meeting strangers, withdrawal from communication, fear of others' perceptions of their child, memory loss, negative thoughts, and prejudice. Physiological reactions include muscle aches and pains, stiffness, an unstable voice, ringing in the ears, blurred vision, paleness, weakness, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, digestive problems, abnormal appetite, weight loss, frequent urination/defecation, sweating, and dizziness and a heavy headache.

Research by Gidion (2025) states that parental anxiety is influenced by predisposing factors (such as genetics, physical illness, psychological trauma, lack of coping skills, and negative thought patterns) and precipitating factors (such as external stress, prolonged stress, medical conditions/substance exposure, and emotional vulnerability). In addition, marital status also influences anxiety, where divorced parents will experience severe anxiety compared to parents who are not divorced. In addition, anxiety is more experienced by parents who do not have social support. Research by Gayatina (2025) shows that anxiety often comes from working parents due to pressure at work.

The research involved participants from several countries, including Nigeria, South Africa, India, Sweden, Iran, Turkey, Canada, the Balkan Peninsula, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Norway, the USA, and the UK. Cultural differences between countries can influence the results. Different research methods will also produce different results.

The theoretical implications of this research can advance scientific knowledge, particularly in the fields of developmental psychology and inclusive education. This research can enrich the literature on children with special needs, particularly the specific factors related to anxiety. Furthermore, this research can strengthen support from partners, family, colleagues, and the community for parents of children with special needs. Practical implications include parents being able to recognize their own anxiety and reduce it with support from those around them and professionals. Educators or therapists for children with special needs are expected to provide psychoeducation for parents. Institutions are expected to provide assistance, mental health campaigns, and free counseling for parents.

This study has limitations in its research method, the number of respondents focused on a single area, the broad focus encompassing all types of children with special needs, the interview data collection, which may have introduced bias, and the possibility of other variables being included in the study. For future research, the researchers hope to examine other factors related to anxiety, use different research methods, and explore locations not covered in previous studies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several factors that cause anxiety in parents who have children with special needs, including parental expectations, a sense of failure in responding to demands, the burden of responsibility, low quality of life, not understanding the child's needs, family conditions, tense relationships between families, difficulty dividing time with the family, depression, stress, mental and emotional exhaustion, lack of social support, fear of being left behind in terms of education, type of disability, witnessing the child's challenges and limitations, physical health and mental burden on parents.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Parents of children with special needs experience anxiety as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of psychological, familial, social, and contextual factors rather than by a single cause. Anxiety is often intensified by unmet parental expectations, feelings of inadequacy in responding to caregiving demands, and the continuous responsibility of supporting the child's development. These challenges are further exacerbated by reduced quality of life, limited understanding of the child's specific needs, family conflict, difficulties balancing caregiving with other family responsibilities, and prolonged experiences of stress, depression, and emotional exhaustion. In addition, insufficient social support, concerns about the child's educational opportunities and future independence, the severity and type of disability, repeated exposure to the child's functional limitations, and the cumulative impact of physical and psychological caregiving burdens collectively contribute to elevated parental anxiety. These findings suggest that parental anxiety should be understood through a holistic ecological perspective that recognizes the complex interplay between individual resilience, family dynamics, social resources, and the child's developmental characteristics.

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