

# The Relationship Between Health Conditions of Autistic Children and Socioeconomic Status

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the relationship between autistic children's health conditions and their family's socioeconomic status (SES), with great impacts on one another. The findings revealed that SES affects autistic children's health in the aspect of economic support, family education, and parenting style. On the other hand, autistic children's health would have an impact on SES in the aspect of exacerbating financial burden, marital tensions, and stigma on parents. After displaying the interactions between SES and autistic children's health, the researchers propose future interventions for autistic children to mitigate their current situation, including raising governmental subsidies to families with autistic children and creating more formal institutions to offer professional treatments to autistic children.

**Keywords:** Education, Autism, Socioeconomic Status, China, Psychological Health

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Special needs children are broadly defined as "children with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities" [1]. This group of children deserves attention from the public because of their disability in accomplishing daily tasks and impairments in the body, both physically and mentally. Despite their developmental vulnerability, some of them are considered gifted, occupying unique talents in specific fields such as "mathematics, reading...music, or athletics" [2]. If sufficient care and attention are invested, those children's talents could be manipulated in a positive way that could enhance developments in specific areas.

The group of children with special needs that this paper would mainly focus on is young patients with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a developmental disability that normally starts from 3 years old. Such disorder is characterized by deficiencies in social interaction, communication, and imaginative play, while also displaying stereotypical, self-stimulatory behaviors [3]. As more interventions are conducted to improve the current situation of those autistic children, more studies focused on causal factors of ASD, and one of those is the relationship between SES and ASD.

Studies have shown that "a low level of SES is associated with worse psychological health," indicating the emotional states of both parents and autistic children would be influenced by SES levels [4]. SES refers to a measure of a person's overall economic and social status, being positively associated with a higher level of physical and mental health [5]. It is an integral criterion that reflects a family's overall quality of education, income, and occupation.

Thus, it becomes worthy to investigate the relationship between the family's SES levels and ASD children. While promoting a positive parenting style could help to mitigate children's autism symptoms, conducting either permissive or authoritarian parenting would intensify the negative symptoms because children's symptoms are closely associated with their perception of their parents' emotions [6]. With children's continuous needs for treatments, the family's wealth could be possibly exhausted; taking care of a disadvantaged child would lead parents to experience stress and overall lower emotional resiliency [7], hindering the improvement of mental health. A family's SES levels may also alter autistic children's symptoms because better economic conditions would allow children to receive advanced treatments with more care, and thus children's symptoms would be alleviated. Meanwhile,

children with autism may also have an impact on the family, forming a closed cycle.

However, little existing research explores the interaction between autistic children and their families and focuses on the possible intervention to be added to families with autistic children so that the existing situation would be improved. Thus, in this paper, researchers are going to explore how family' SES affects autistic children. Based on the findings, it would also provide several solutions.

**2. SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (SES)**

SES refers to a measure of a person's overall economic and social status. It tends to be positively associated with better health [5]. Normally, it is a combination of income, education, and occupations. Meanwhile, an obvious method to measure the level of SES is through income. Total household income is calculated when the social and economic status most commonly used measure of income, based on which SES is categorized into 5 levels (see Table 1). The study of SES has been an issue of great interest in Chinese sociology, especially in the field of social stratification. But for a long time, Chinese scholars have conducted incomplete research on SES and its stratification. Chinese scholars generally study it through occupational prestige surveys, which can only rank the SES of a few occupations (usually dozens of occupations), but cannot measure the prestige status of all occupational groups or all members of society, and thus cannot describe and analyze the prestige stratification system of the whole society.

**Table 1:** The five levels of SES adapted from Bureau Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 2010.

Household income (\$1,000)	Number of households (unit: 100)	percentage (%)	All violent crimes(rate per1,000 person)	All property crimes(rate per1,000 person)
less than 15	171,856	14.0	28.4	195.3
15-35	302,064	24.6	22.9	132.2
35-50	194,069	15.8	18.2	121.6
50-75	209,652	17.1	17.6	109.8
75 or more	351,212	28.6	14.9	114.4

Education is often thought of as a key indicator of socioeconomic status because it conveys information about the entire life cycle of earning potential, while income, and provides a snapshot of a person's social and economic conditions [8]. Occupation, independent of wages, is a traditional indicator of socioeconomic status, as it is believed to convey information about an individual's power, income, and educational requirements, and is associated with various positions in the occupational structure [9]. Most use professional SES

calculation specified categories to labor and to sort these categories.

**3. AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)**

ASD is a disease related to brain development. It can affect how a person's perceptions and interaction with others, and lead to social and communication problems. The disorder also includes limited and repetitive behavior patterns [10]. According to statistics from the National Library of Medicine, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates the international prevalence of ASD at 0.76%. It may not be a large amount of the population, however, there is a trend that indicates, that in the United States, the percentage of getting ASD doubled from 2000 to 2010.

ASD has a complicated cause. Autism is a neurological disorder affected by genetic and environmental factors that affect brain development. It is categorized into three levels. The higher the level, the more serious the disease. To be more specific, in level 1, the patients are capable of communicating with others but in a relatively inefficient way. They are less independent than their peers, typically. Secondly, in level 2, patients usually have severe social communication and interaction problems. They can focus on one thing for a long time, but it is very difficult to move their attention from one to another. Additionally, they are capable of speaking very simple sentences. Thirdly, level 3 represents the most serious form of autism. Patients barely react to others, and they are limited to clearly expressing themselves.

The number of children with autism in China is approximately 1.64 million and 46.5% of families spend more than 50% of their total household income on the rehabilitation of their children with autism and nearly 30% of families do not even have enough income to pay for the rehabilitation of their children with autism. This is why China lacks protective measures for children with autism and related response programs [11].

**4. DISCUSSION**

Two interconnected factors—a family's SES and the health condition of autistic children—interacted and affected one another.

**4.1. Impacts of Families' SES on Autistic Children's Health**

*4.1.1 Economic Support*

First of all, the family's economic status has a great impact on the healthy condition of autistic children. There are two main expenses for autistic children: the services and unemployment of their family members. Most service institutions in China are expensive hospitals

and rehabilitation training centers. Pie chart 1 and pie chart 2 [11] show service organizations' proportion and charging standards. The cost consists of tuition fees, board and lodging, and medical expenses [11].

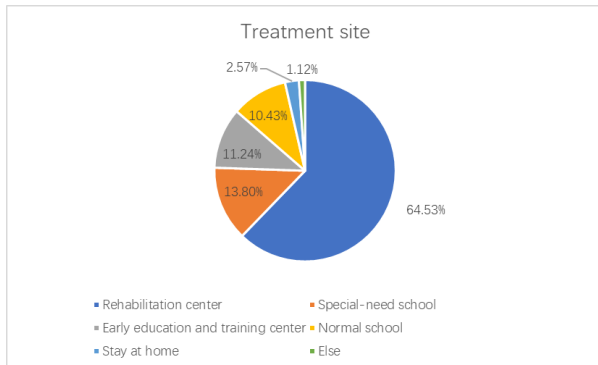


Figure 1: The Treatment Sites of ASD Children

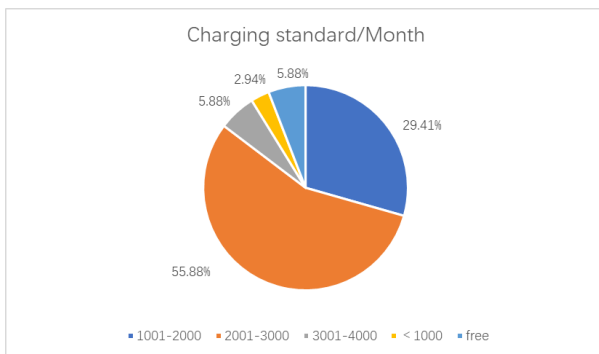


Figure 2: The Charging Standards of Service Institutions Per Month

Owing to the imperfect policy and social welfare for autistic children in China, parents have to afford most of these expenses by themselves. Therefore, families with high-income levels are more affordable to pay for the huge expenditure, providing more efficient treatments, better learning, and living environments for their children in the long term of recovery.

Besides, although a minority of autistic children can achieve relatively high independence in their adulthood, most of them remain very dependent on others [12]. As for the independent individuals, most of their jobs are low-level and are found with the help of their parents, instead of through the open job market. Meanwhile, their payments are generally low [13]. Due to autistic children's low self-care ability and the high costs of employing nurses, family members usually choose to take care of the patients personally, especially in those low-income families, causing one of the parents to resign from their work and stay at home [11]. Bearing the huge expenses of medical services and family care, low-income families have already been overburdened; under such family circumstances, autistic children are even harder to get long-term and effective treatments, causing their health conditions to deteriorate.

#### 4.1.2 Family Education

The education of the family also affects the disease progression of autistic children, including the educational degree of the parents, their attitudes toward autism, and their parenting style.

Compared with families with high educational levels, families with lower educational levels are more likely to have a less comprehensive understanding of autism and rehabilitation training, which leads to a delay in the opportunity and process of treatment. Meanwhile, low-educated parents are less likely to find well-paid jobs, earning enough money to afford their kids' illnesses. As a result, their autistic children may have no access to sufficient treatment and fail to receive long-term special care.

#### 4.1.3 Parenting Style

Parenting style also plays a significant role, which affecting the recovery process as well as the growth of their kid. The research mentions two typical misunderstandings of parenting style after introspecting the living circumstances of elders with autism in China. Firstly, parents of severe young autistic patients often attach more importance to cognitive education, ignoring the cultivation of interests of their kids. Secondly, parents are inclined to be more aware of their children's deficiencies instead of their merits [14]. Compared to normal kids, children with autism need more support and encouragement from their parents. If the parents can pay equal attention to their interest cultivation as well as cognitive education, and praise their strengths more than focusing on their deficiencies, those autistic children would benefit from such parenting, and thus they are more likely to mitigate their illness.

#### 4.1.4 Left-behind Autistic Children in Rural Areas

There's a representative group of autistic children in China who suffer from low-income and low-educational level family circumstances, making them less accessible to curative care and less attention by the public than others. They are left-behind autistic children who live in rural areas. There is no doubt that the family income deficiency will seriously hinder their treatment. What is more important is their parents' understanding of autism and their attitudes toward autism further impede autistic children's cure. Firstly, the channels—TV, the internet, books, and periodicals— through which the parents obtain information are informal, causing their knowledge about autism to become fragmented and backward. This leads to a later awareness of kids' autism and the unprofessional ways of seeking help. Furthermore, due to the parent's lack of education, they have old-dated concepts on how to nurture their kids. What they care more about is the kids' development of intelligence,

physical health, and study instead of their requirement of emotion and mental health [15]. Such ignorance of the symptoms of their autistic kids causes inappropriate coping styles for the illness. Thus, autistic children in rural areas suffer even more severely from states of illness than their city counterparts.

## **4.2 Impacts of Autistic Children on Families' SES**

### **4.2.1 Financial Burden**

Raising children with autism intensifies the financial burden on families. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics show that in 2012, the annual per capita net incomes of rural households and urban residents were 7,917 yuan and 24,565 yuan respectively, with the total population on the Chinese mainland of 1,354,040,000. But this year, there were already 1,640,000 autistic children in China, 46.5% of the families spend more than 50% of their total income on the rehabilitation training for autistic children and nearly 30% of the families can't afford it [14]. An interview survey indicates that the respondents consist that having autistic children has made the family invest the massive wealth during the treatment and recovery of their kids, leading to the exhaustion of their families' amassments [16]. Due to the huge expenses spent on autistic children, the burden on these families has been greatly intensified.

### **4.2.2 Marital Status**

Suffering from great pressure would worsen the marital status of parents of autistic children. Studies found that having excessive pressure will lead to more conflicts and contradictions between parents and lower marriage qualities [16]. There are several pressure sources for parents with autistic kids: playing multiple roles at the same time, lacking help resource systems, lacking social support networks, having no standard schemes for their kids' illness, and enduring lowering self-efficacy [17]. These enormous pressures have detrimental effects on the parents' mental health, which makes them enjoy their marriage less. The unfortunate marriage condition and the social attitude toward autistic families lead to a higher divorce rate than the general public [16]. Thus, parents' marital status with autistic children is likely to get worse due to the heavy pressure of raising these kids.

### **4.2.3 Stigma**

The long-term terrible condition of autistic children also influences parents' mental health. Many parents are beset by the courtesy stigma and hold a negative attitude toward their kids' illnesses. Studies from western countries found that most parents of autistic children had experienced stigma in their life [18]. And there are also a

few studies that found that the parents' courtesy stigma in Hong Kong was serious [18]. Having the experience of courtesy stigma, parents may lose their self-respect and self-efficacy and suffer from mental illness. The generation of courtesy stigma relates to the insufficient knowledge and misunderstanding about autism by people around them. Boosting the public recognition of autism, establishing mutual support groups, and spreading medical knowledge to the parents are useful ways for parents to resist courtesy stigma [18].

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In short, there are interactions between a family's SES levels—overall social and economic status—and their autistic children's condition—the severity of children's symptoms and their level of possibility to receive proper treatments—in different aspects. A family's SES level would influence autistic children's symptoms: receiving higher economic support would lead to autistic children's access to better treatments; parents having a higher level of education would recognize their children's symptoms and offer interventions earlier; parents who ignore autistic children's extracurricular interests and strengths would hinder those children's mental development and recovery. The severity of autistic children's symptoms could also have an impact on a family's SES level: supporting autistic children to receive formal and long-term treatments would make parents endure financial burden; taking care of an autistic child would create label and stigma to the entire family, leading to parents' severe mental pressure; having such a child would also harm the marital relationship, further intensifying the family's economic burden.

This research paper sheds light on steps that should be taken to mitigate the current situation of autistic children with the improvement on both familial SES and social levels. Firstly, deeper academic research should be done to generate a more comprehensive understanding of autism—the development of its symptoms and effective treatments. As researchers have laid the academic foundation, more publications about autism could be popularized, making sure that parents and the public become more aware of families with such special needs and each autistic child's condition could be recognized on time. Besides, raising governmental actions is also one suitable solution. The existing assistance for autistic children is not sufficient: no formal institutions, but only folk charity organizations—SunFlower in Shanghai, TongXingXin in Chengdu, XingXingYu in Beijing—that were established by commoners and extended their sphere of influence in a limited range such as district or city in a small scale instead of province or even country in a broader scale. Third, the government should distribute more responsibility to helping those disadvantaged autistic children and their families—

providing subsidies to enhance each autistic family's economic conditions and establishing governmental organizations with advanced technologies to offer professional treatments for autistic children. Thus, with further academic research and financial funds, autistic children's situations could be aided.

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