



## UNDERSTANDING SUPPORT FOR PARENTS OF AUTISTIC CHILDREN THROUGH A WHATSAPP GROUP

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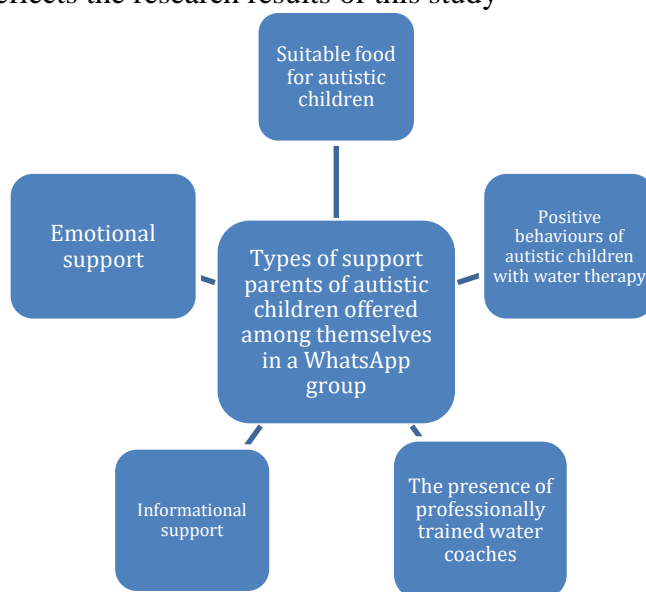


## Research Highlights

Smartphones have allowed people to communicate actively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through social media. One is WhatsApp. It has provided opportunities for social groups to be in existence and consequently let ones share information and offer support. This study aimed to understand the support parents of autistic children offered to each other through a WhatsApp Group, SPARISK Support Group, that was created specifically for those who enrolled their children in a water therapy programme in Malaysia. It provided a platform for these parents to hold various discussions on caring for their autistic children. The study found that there were five types of support that parents offered among themselves: (a) types of food suitable for their children to increase concentration and combat impulsiveness; (b) relating positive behaviours of their children while undergoing the water therapy programme; (c) having the presence of professionally trained water therapy coaches; (d) informational support and (e) emotional support.

## Graphical Abstract

The chart below reflects the research results of this study



## Research Objectives

Around the world, autism affects 60 in every 10000 children (Lindgren & Doobay, 2011), with about 47000 children suffering from it in Malaysia alone (Rofiza Aboo Bakar & Hanani Ahmad Zubir, 2018). Autistic children suffer from multifaceted deficiencies in social interaction, communication skills and physical skills (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) besides showing disruptive behaviours (Ozdemir, 2008) and having special obsessions (APA, 2000). Parents of autistic children are reported experiencing frustrations caring for them, and undergoing stress at high levels (Dabrowska & Pisula, 2010). They need to be in touch with other parents of autistic children to allow them to share experiences and get answers to their problems (Niela-Vilen, Axelin, Salantera, & Melender, 2014). Therefore, connecting with each other in a support group can help them manage stress and seek for information. Since little research has been done on social media support group, particularly WhatsApp, for parents of autistic children in Malaysia, this study aimed to understand the



types of support they had for each other on their WhatsApp group called the SPARISK Support Group. This group came into existence as parents who enrolled their autistic children in a water therapy programme called SPARISK believed that it could benefit them in discussing various issues about their children and autism.

## Methodology

In this study, a qualitative phenomenological design (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 2007) was used to understand about the support parents of autistic children enrolled in a SPARISK water therapy programme had for each other. A request letter was sent to the principal of the programme prior to the study. Four parents of different races were selected as participants and convenience sampling was used. These diversified participants were believed to provide enough data for themes and cross-case theme analysis (Creswell, 2007). The participants were a Malay male aged 50 and whose son was 14 with moderate autism, a Malay female aged 42 and whose sons were 12 and 16, with moderate and severe autism respectively, a Kadazan female aged 40 and whose son was 13 with severe autism, and a Chinese female aged 37 and whose son was 7 with moderate autism. Data were gathered using individual semi-structured interviews between 30 and 40 minutes each. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts underwent member-checks to ensure validity and reliability. From the transcripts, identification of five important themes was reached. These themes were compared to the results obtained from similar studies to ensure accurate interpretations.

## Results

This study found that there were five emerging themes:

*(a) Relating types of food suitable for autistic children*

Advice about food was prevalent. Parents believed that supplying fish oil and free-gluten food, and giving less sugar and dairy products would help eliminate their children's hyperactivity.

*(b) Relating positive experiences with their autistic children while undergoing the water therapy programme*

Parents believed that the programme had enabled their children to control their behaviours, not running away from people, exercise body balancing and utter new words.

*(c) Feeling glad that they met with the professionally-trained water therapy coaches*

Parents were glad that the coaches had helped their children be more focussed, and provided solutions for parents rather than harping on sad stories about autism.

*(d) Informational support*

Parents shared several issues like toilet-training their autistic children, finding a suitable hospital for circumcision, imparting steps to enrol children in special classes in government schools, and finding websites to teach their children reading.

*(e) Emotional support*

Parents shared their unique but sad experiences when they brought their children into the society. However, they believed that sad stories could not change anything. They had to find interventions to help their children have a better future.

## Findings

In this study, five themes emerged from the WhatsApp support group for parents of autistic children: (a) relating types of food suitable for autistic children; (b) relating positive





experiences with their autistic children while undergoing the water therapy programme; (c) feeling glad that they met with the professionally-trained water therapy coaches; (d) informational support; and (e) emotional support. The findings were consistent with (a) Lucarelli's et al. (1995) that autistic children's tantrums can be minimized if free-gluten food is consumed; (b) Teske's (2018) that autistic children who undergo water therapy can increase social interaction; (c, d) Cole, Kharwa, Khumalo, Reinke and Karrim's (2017) that having professionals' advice and learning from others in their support group benefit them; and (e) Hema R. Mustafa, Short and Fan's (2015) that relying on each other for emotional support is vital.

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