



Parental Burnout Among Mothers of Children with Special Needs: A Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the levels and dimensions of parental burnout among mothers of children with special needs in Indonesia. Using a quantitative descriptive method, data were collected from 100 participants through the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA). Descriptive analysis showed that most mothers experienced low to moderate burnout, with emotional exhaustion as the most prominent dimension, followed by emotional distancing. These findings highlight the psychological vulnerability of caregiving mothers and underscore the importance of interventions targeting emotional fatigue and strengthening parent-child connection.

INTRODUCTION

Parental burnout is a chronic stress condition experienced by parents as a result of prolonged caregiving responsibilities. This condition is characterized by emotional exhaustion, feelings of detachment from one's child, and a diminished sense of competence in fulfilling the parental role (Mikolajczak, Gross, & Roskam, 2019). On a global scale, studies have shown that the prevalence of parental burnout ranges from 1% to 30%, depending on the country, with a conservative average of approximately 5% (Roskam et al., 2021). More detailed findings indicate that women, particularly mothers, are more vulnerable to parental burnout compared to men. This increased vulnerability is attributed to a higher level of involvement in child-rearing activities (Mikolajczak, Raes, Avalosse, & Roskam, 2018).

In Indonesia, this phenomenon has gained growing academic and clinical attention. Research conducted by Abidin et al. (2024) using the Indonesian version of the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA-ID) found that 5.3% of mothers were identified as being at risk of burnout, while 1.8% had already experienced it. In contrast, no fathers in the study were identified as experiencing burnout. These results are consistent with those of Mahanani et al. (2024), who reported that Indonesian mothers are more likely than fathers to experience burnout. Several contributing factors have been identified, including cultural norms, social expectations, and unequal gender roles. Mothers continue to be viewed as the primary caregivers and face greater societal pressure, often leading to a disproportionate caregiving burden over an extended period (Mahanani et al., 2024).

This heightened risk is further influenced by the nature of maternal involvement in caregiving, which typically begins during pregnancy and continues throughout the child's development. Although fathers may contribute emotional and financial support, mothers are usually more engaged in daily caregiving activities, which places them at greater risk of burnout. The societal expectation that mothers should serve as the primary caregivers adds to the psychological burden they experience (Miranda, 2013; Raychana et al., 2024).

The likelihood of parental burnout increases when mothers face more complex caregiving challenges. A study by Dzielińska, Lasota, and Piotrowski (2024) found that parents of children with special needs or chronic illnesses reported higher levels of burnout compared to other parents. Similarly, Miranda (2013) noted that mothers of children with special needs were more emotionally exhausted than those raising children without developmental concerns. This is further supported by Masefield et al. (2020), who highlighted that these mothers often exhibit poorer overall health than mothers of typically developing children.

High caregiving demands, coupled with limited social support, are major contributors to parental burnout. Mothers are often responsible for coordinating therapy, education, and social activities for their children, which increases their physical and emotional strain (Raychana et al., 2024). Hidayah et al. (2023) emphasized that parenting a child with special needs presents unique developmental challenges that demand more attention than parenting a typically developing child.

Children with special needs often require additional support in areas such as intensive therapy, specialized education, and adaptation to social environments. Moreover, many mothers face a double burden, as they must balance caregiving responsibilities with domestic tasks or professional obligations (Hidayah, Suyadi, & Akbar, 2023). This caregiving complexity, which involves emotional, physical, and financial aspects, is often worsened by a lack of adequate social support. As a result, mothers are more vulnerable to chronic stress and mental exhaustion (Prasetyanti & Widayat, 2024). The burden not only impacts their emotional well-being but also affects their physical and psychological health. Concerns about the child's future, along with societal expectations that place mothers at the center of caregiving, further intensify psychological distress (Raychana et al., 2024).

Parental burnout has profound consequences for both parents and children. Parents who experience burnout often report increased guilt, chronic stress, and a higher risk of severe depression or suicidal ideation (Mikolajczak, Gross, & Roskam, 2019). They are also more prone to engage in negative parenting behaviors, including impatience, neglect, and even verbal or physical aggression toward their children (Mikolajczak, Gross, & Roskam, 2019). In line with these findings, Raychana et al. (2024) observed that mothers experiencing burnout were more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviors, such as pinching, hitting, or raising their voices when interacting with their children.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on parental burnout by focusing specifically on Indonesian mothers of children with special needs. This population is often underrepresented in psychological literature despite their heightened vulnerability. By examining parental burnout in the distinct caregiving context of mothers raising children with special needs, this study aims to enrich the theoretical understanding of parental burnout and inform culturally relevant interventions. Accordingly, it seeks to describe the levels and dimensions of parental burnout experienced by this population in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental burnout is defined as a psychological condition involving emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by chronic and overwhelming parenting-related stress (Roskam, Bayot, & Mikolajczak, 2022). This condition emerges when the demands of caregiving consistently exceed the parent's capacity to cope. Parents experiencing burnout often feel so emotionally depleted that merely thinking about their parenting responsibilities can be overwhelming.

Hubert and Aujoulat (2018) describe parental burnout as a state characterized by significant physical and emotional exhaustion, emotional detachment from one's children, and a diminished sense of efficacy in the parental role. Similarly, Mikolajczak, Gross, and Roskam (2019) emphasize that parental burnout is distinct from ordinary parenting stress in both its intensity and persistence. It involves deep emotional fatigue, a loss of pleasure in parenting, and emotional distancing from one's children. Parents may feel unable

to connect meaningfully with their children and experience reduced satisfaction in everyday parenting interactions.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, the present study adopts the definition proposed by Roskam, Bayot, and Mikolajczak (2022), which conceptualizes parental burnout as a psychological syndrome marked by sustained emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion due to prolonged exposure to parenting-related stressors.

Dimensions of Parental Burnout

This study adopts the four-dimensional model of parental burnout as outlined by Roskam, Bayot, and Mikolajczak (2022), developed and validated through the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA). The dimensions are described as follows:

- 1. Exhaustion in the Parental Role**

This dimension refers to the persistent emotional and physical fatigue experienced in fulfilling parenting responsibilities. Parents often report feeling drained and unable to recover, even after rest or respite.

- 2. Emotional Distancing from One's Children**

This dimension involves a progressive emotional detachment from one's children, where interactions become instrumental rather than emotionally engaged. The parent-child relationship may lose its emotional warmth and become task-oriented.

- 3. Feelings of Being Fed Up with the Parental Role**

This reflects a loss of meaning, motivation, and enjoyment in parenting. Parents may feel emotionally numb, disengaged, and unfulfilled in their role, resulting in a significant decline in parental satisfaction.

- 4. Contrast with Previous Parental Self**

This dimension captures the perceived gap between one's current self and their past identity as a parent. It includes feelings of personal failure, incompetence, and a loss of confidence in one's ability to parent effectively.

Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological impact of chronic caregiving strain, particularly in high-demand contexts such as raising a child with special needs.

Consequences of Parental Burnout

Parental burnout carries serious consequences not only for the individual parent but also for their partner and children. According to Mikolajczak, Raes, Avalosse, and Roskam (2018), one of the most concerning outcomes is the heightened risk of suicidal ideation and escape fantasies, as parents who experience prolonged emotional exhaustion often face increased vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and mental health crises. Additionally, parental burnout is frequently associated with sleep disturbances and a greater susceptibility to addictive behaviors, including excessive use of alcohol, drugs, or social media as maladaptive coping mechanisms.

The condition also impacts the quality of spousal relationships. Burnout tends to elevate emotional tension between partners, leading to more frequent conflicts and a decline in emotional intimacy. Parents suffering from burnout

may become more irritable and emotionally withdrawn, contributing to communication breakdowns and reduced relational satisfaction within the family system.

Children, as direct recipients of parenting behavior, are also adversely affected. Parents with high levels of burnout may unintentionally neglect their children's physical and emotional needs. More alarmingly, parental burnout has been linked to an increased risk of harsh parenting practices, including verbal or physical aggression. These consequences highlight the urgent need for early detection and supportive interventions aimed at preserving the well-being of all family members.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative descriptive design to explore the levels and dimensions of parental burnout among mothers of children with special needs in Indonesia.

Population and Sampling

The population consisted of mothers raising children with special needs across Indonesia. To clarify the population characteristics, this study adopted the definition of children with special needs proposed by Kristiana and Widayanti (2023), which includes those with physical impairments (such as visual, hearing, and mobility impairments), cognitive difficulties (such as intellectual disability and specific learning disorders), behavioral and emotional disorders (such as autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder), as well as children identified as gifted and talented. A total of 100 mothers who met these criteria were recruited using purposive sampling.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed via parenting forums and social media groups related to children with special needs. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Instrument

Parental burnout was assessed using the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA) developed by Roskam, Bayot, and Mikolajczak (2022) and adapted into Bahasa Indonesia by Mahanani et al. (2024). The scale consists of 23 items covering four dimensions: exhaustion in the parental role, emotional distancing, feelings of being fed up, and contrast with former parental self. It demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .896$).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were used to examine the overall levels and dimensions of parental burnout. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 30.0 for Windows.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Parental Burnout Profile among Mothers of Children with Special Needs

Parental burnout scores among mothers of children with special needs were described using minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation values. The total score ranged from 10 to 69, with a mean of 33.00 and a standard deviation of 13.75. The scale's hypothetical minimum and maximum scores were 0 and 138, with a midpoint of 69 used as a reference for level categorization.

Based on this, burnout levels were grouped into three categories: low (0–52.06), moderate (52.07–86.02), and high (86.03–138). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Parental Burnout Categories

Score Range	Category	Frequency	Percentage
0 – 52.06	Low	72	72%
52.07 – 86.02	Moderate	28	28%
86.03 – 138	High	0	0%
Total	Total	100	100%

The results indicate that 72% of the mothers reported low levels of parental burnout, suggesting relatively manageable psychological strain. Meanwhile, 28% fell into the moderate category, and no participants were classified as experiencing high parental burnout. This suggests that although caregiving demands are high, the majority of mothers in this study maintained stable parental functioning.

Descriptive Statistics of Parental Burnout Dimensions

Descriptive analysis was also conducted on the four core dimensions of parental burnout to identify which aspects were most prominent. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Parental Burnout Dimensions

Dimension	N	Mean	SD
Exhaustion in the Parental Role	100	1.53	0.77
Emotional Distancing from Children	100	1.49	0.76
Contrast with Former Parental Self	100	1.42	0.68
Feelings of Being Fed Up	100	1.40	0.68

Among the four dimensions, Exhaustion in the Parental Role had the highest mean score. This indicates that emotional and physical fatigue was the most commonly experienced symptom. Emotional Distancing followed closely, suggesting that some participants responded to chronic stress by emotionally withdrawing from their children. The other two dimensions, Contrast with Former Parental Self and Feelings of Being Fed Up, had slightly lower mean scores, indicating a less intense impact in those areas.

The findings of this study reveal that emotional and physical exhaustion in performing parenting duties was the most prominent experience among mothers of children with special needs. This symptom appears to be the most pressing psychological strain faced by participants. Emotional distancing from their children also emerged as a common pattern, suggesting that mothers may adopt emotional withdrawal as a coping mechanism to manage ongoing stress. In

contrast, feelings of dissatisfaction in the parental role and a perceived disconnection from their former parental identity were found to be less dominant.

These results are consistent with previous research. Mikolajczak, Raes, Avalosse, and Roskam (2018) identified emotional exhaustion as the core element of parental burnout. It serves as a key indicator that distinguishes this condition from other types of psychological fatigue. The high prevalence of this dimension in various contexts underscores its diagnostic and theoretical significance.

Support for this trend is also evident in the study by Abidin et al. (2024), who found that emotional exhaustion was the most frequently experienced symptom among Indonesian parents. Their findings reinforce the relevance of this dimension in local cultural contexts, highlighting the emotional demands of parenting in families with children who require special attention.

Further confirmation comes from Parathugari and Sekhar (2021), who observed that emotional exhaustion and emotional distancing were particularly pronounced among mothers of children with autism. Their study also suggested that both maternal age and the type of disability significantly influenced the severity of these experiences, indicating the need to consider demographic and diagnostic factors in understanding burnout risks.

Similarly, Kahrıman, Polat, and Gürol (2019) found emotional exhaustion to be the most dominant symptom among mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, adding to the growing consensus on the central role of this dimension in parental burnout.

A predictive model proposed by Lin, Szczygieł, and Blanchard (2025) further demonstrated that emotional exhaustion and emotional distancing contribute most significantly to the overall experience of parental burnout. These two factors explained the largest proportion of variance in burnout scores across their sample, reaffirming their importance as targets for early identification and intervention.

Taken together, these findings suggest that parental burnout in mothers of children with special needs is primarily driven by emotional exhaustion and distancing. These dimensions should be prioritized in both assessment practices and support programs aimed at enhancing parental well-being.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the levels and dimensions of parental burnout among mothers of children with special needs in Indonesia. The findings showed that most participants experienced low to moderate levels of burnout, with emotional and physical exhaustion emerging as the most prominent symptom, followed by emotional distancing. These results confirm prior evidence that emotional fatigue is a core characteristic of parental burnout, and they emphasize the psychological vulnerability faced by mothers in caregiving roles. Despite the demanding nature of their responsibilities, a large proportion of participants demonstrated psychological resilience.

Based on these findings, targeted interventions should be prioritized to address emotional exhaustion and strengthen emotional connection between mothers and their children. Psychosocial support such as counseling, peer groups, or reflective parenting programs may help reduce fatigue and emotional

withdrawal. In addition, burnout prevention strategies should be incorporated into parenting education and public health campaigns to raise awareness and promote early recognition.

FURTHER STUDY

This study is limited by its exclusive focus on mothers as primary caregivers. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of parental burnout, future research should involve both mothers and fathers. Additionally, considering the central role of emotional exhaustion and emotional distancing identified in this study, future investigations are encouraged to develop and assess intervention strategies targeting these specific dimensions. Such research could inform more effective and tailored support systems for parents of children with special needs.

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