

Challenges Faced by Parents of Children with Autism when Attending Social Functions: A Comparison between Colombo and Kurunegala, Sri Lanka

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Autism is a much discussed topic in the world today. Children with Autism find social situations very challenging and may avoid interactions altogether (Cumine, et al, 2000). Matson et al (2012) have said, 'Although the symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorders are universally accepted; the reported severity of symptoms and the manifestation of symptoms may be sensitive to cultural differences'. Therefore the findings of research that have been conducted in other countries focusing on the social aspect of autism and related parental experiences cannot be generalized to Sri Lanka. However, there is no research available in Sri Lanka focusing this topic. Using the phenomenological qualitative research design, the purpose of this study was to identify the challenges experienced by the parents, when attending social functions with their children who have autism and are in the 'early communicator stage' and strategies used to overcome them, in selected areas in Colombo and Kurunegala districts in Sri Lanka. Data were collected through semi structured interviews held at two sites (Colombo & Kurunegala) using eight participants. By using an inductive research approach, two main themes were identified:

- (1) 'Challenges Experienced' by the parents
- (2) 'Coping Strategies'.

The two sub-themes identified under challenges were 'challenges related to child's behaviour' and 'challenges related to social inclusion'. The two sub-themes found under coping strategies were 'self-developed strategies' and 'strategies that have been recommended by professionals'. It was found that participants from both districts experienced similar challenges although the strategies that they used to overcome them were different.