

ABSTRACT

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition that requires intensive and continuous care, where parents play a vital role in both management and day-to-day support. Parents serve not only as primary caregivers but also as consistent facilitators of their child's learning and socialisation, making them critical partners in intervention processes. Nevertheless, the present study has focused on the Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP) of parents of children with autism on pre-requisite skills. These pre-requisite skills, which include social, communication, and self-help abilities, are essential for children to progress in learning and independence, leading towards vocational development. Without a clear understanding and effective practice of these skills at home, interventions often lose continuity and efficacy. Thus, the present study was undertaken with the objective of assessing the KAP of parents regarding pre-requisite skills, while also evaluating the effect of a sensitization programme designed to enhance parental knowledge, attitude, and practice in this domain. In addition to KAP, the study also addressed a crucial but often overlooked dimension: the mental health of parents themselves and their self-efficacy. Parenting a child with autism is stressful and emotionally taxing, often contributing to poor mental health outcomes and reduced self-efficacy among parents. In recognition of this challenge, the study simultaneously aimed to assess parents' mental health and self-efficacy, while examining the impact of the sensitization programme on these parameters as well.

The study was conducted in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Out of the 16 special schools shortlisted for the present study, only 5 schools accepted to be a part of the research, and 143 parents of children with autism consented to participate. The study followed an action-based cross-sectional design by adopting a purposive sampling technique. The study was also approved by the Institutional Human Ethics Committee of the University (approval No. IHEC/19-20/HD/46). For the present study, four assessment scales were chiefly used, such as a self-developed tool to elicit socio-demographic profile of parents of children with autism, which includes the gender of parents, qualification, occupation, family income, number of siblings, types of family, and area of residence. A Likert scale consisting of 35 items each was developed by the researcher to assess the Knowledge, Attitude and Practices (KAP) of parents towards pre-requisite skills. The items

covered the aspects of scheduling, attention, socialisation, self-control, self-advocacy, safety, communication, and imitation. The tool was tested for reliability and validity. Face validity and content validity were done, and the feedback and suggestions from subject experts were considered and incorporated to further refine the scales. The reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha reliability test, with scores of 0.94 for knowledge, 0.84 for attitude, and 0.79 for practice, showing an excellent, very good, and good reliability of the scales, respectively. Validity was tested using principle component analysis (PCA) where the sampling adequacy was also found to be adequate for KAP with 0.760, 0.846, and 0.645, respectively and Bartlett's test of Sphericity showed the significant level with cumulative percentage of 69.240 for knowledge, 69.652 for attitude, and 69.201 for practices, which were in the acceptable ranges. Standardised tools such as Mental Health Inventory (MHI) by Jagdish and Srivastava 2005, and Early Intervention Parents Self-Efficacy Scale (EIPSES) by Guimond, Wilcox, & Lamorey 2008, were utilized to assess parents' mental health and self-efficacy.

The baseline findings of the study revealed that parents of children with autism demonstrated average to low levels of knowledge, unfavourable attitudes, and low to average levels of practice regarding pre-requisite skills. This indicated that while some awareness existed, a lack of comprehensive understanding and consistent application remained barriers to supporting children effectively. Parents' mental health levels were found to be poor to very poor, highlighting the significant emotional strain and stress endured by families. Self-efficacy levels were also reported to be average to low, reflecting a lack of confidence among parents in their ability to handle the complex and demanding requirements of raising a child with ASD. These findings underscored the need for sensitization/interventions that simultaneously address both skill-based awareness and the psychosocial challenges parents face.

A sensitization programme was planned and conducted, specifically designed for this research, aimed at equipping parents with an improved understanding of pre-requisite skills and strategies to effectively support their children in everyday situations. Of the larger pool, 30 parents were placed in the experimental group and another 30 in the control group for the sensitization component of the study. Statistical analyses revealed that paired t-tests demonstrated meaningful differences between pre- and post-test scores

when compared with the control group, showing small to medium effect size in knowledge and attitude, as well as practice, respectively. These findings suggest that while knowledge improved modestly, the programme was particularly effective in reshaping parental attitudes and practice areas. Repeated measures – ANOVA was conducted to examine the sustainability showed that there was no significant variance in the experimental group's post-test scores and follow-up scores. This was observed both at the first follow-up (after a 10-day interval) and the second follow-up (after a month's interval), indicating that the improvements were largely retained. However, a slight decline was observed across follow-ups, implying reinforcement over time is necessary.

In terms of parental mental health and self-efficacy, the experimental group showed significant improvements compared to the control group, with medium effect sizes, indicating meaningful changes in the mental health state and self-efficacy levels of parents. Repeated measures - ANOVA again confirmed that these improvements were largely sustained across follow-up assessments, although some minor declines were evident, indicating consistent reinforcement and long-term support mechanisms are necessary for enduring impact.

The findings from this study carry important implications, highlighting the critical need to focus on parents not only as caregivers but also as individuals who require knowledge, skills, emotional resilience, and confidence to manage the demands of raising a child with ASD. Training programmes should therefore be designed to be holistic, integrating both informational and psychosocial support elements. The study points to policy and practice implications. There is a strong case for embedding parent sensitization and support programmes within the infrastructure of special schools and community health systems. Policymakers and practitioners should consider establishing formalized parent training modules as a routine part of early intervention services.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that while parents of children with autism often begin with limited knowledge and confidence, when parents are supported with knowledge, attitude, practice, mental health care, and self-efficacy, the outcomes can be transformative for both children and parents contributing to better developmental outcomes for children with autism and a healthier, more resilient family system.

**Keywords- Autism, Parents, Pre-requisite skills, Mental health, Self-efficacy,
Sensitization**