

Maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction among mothers of children on the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and mothers of children with typical development

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ABSTRACT

Background: The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction among mothers of children on the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and mothers of children with typical development. The research hypotheses were about the relationship between the maternal self-efficacy and the satisfaction with life, and about the differences in the maternal self-efficacy and the satisfaction with life between the two groups of mothers.

Subjects and Method: The sample consisted of 125 mothers, of which 61 were mothers of children with ASD and 64 were mothers of children with typical development. The mothers answered two online questionnaires: a life satisfaction questionnaire and a maternal self-efficacy questionnaire.

Results: The research findings indicated a positive relationship between the maternal self-efficacy and the life satisfaction, so that mothers who reported a higher level of maternal self-efficacy showed higher satisfaction with their lives. Also, differences were found in the life satisfaction between the two groups of mothers: mothers of children with typical development reported a higher satisfaction with life. Contrary to expectations, no differences were found in the maternal self-efficacy between the two groups of mothers.

Conclusion: The uniqueness of the study is in the examination of the experience of mothering children with ASD among mothers in Israel, in light of the scant research literature on this subject. In addition, the current study examines the relationship between two important areas: the maternal self-efficacy and the life satisfaction, a relationship about which there is little research both in the context of mothers in general and in the context of mothers of children with ASD in particular. The research findings also have an applied contribution - the findings may help multi-professional teams develop awareness of the experience of mothering a child with ASD, the need for support and accompaniment for mothers and collaborative work with them.

Keywords: mothers, mothers of children on the autistic spectrum (ASD), children on the autistic spectrum, life satisfaction, maternal self-efficacy.

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BACKGROUND

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an umbrella term for a wide range of behaviors associated with a developmental neurobiological disorder. The disorder is defined as a spectrum, since there are significant differences between children who are on the spectrum in the severity of the disability and their cognitive ability. The disorder has two main components: (1) Consistent impairment in social communication and social interactions. The disorder manifests itself in difficulty in social-emotional reciprocity; difficulty in non-verbal communication behavior used for social interactions; and difficulty in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships and connections; (2) Limited repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. These patterns are expressed in stereotypical and repetitive areas of interest and activity; compulsive adherence to fixed customs and rituals that are not functional; difficulty with changes in the agenda; difficulties in regulating and processing sensory information, and/ or increased interest in sensory aspects of the environment (APA, 2013).

Since the disorder is usually diagnosed from the second year of life, in the first months of a baby with ASD, parents and family members continue their lives as usual and expect the child to develop age-appropriate skills such as communication and language. When no signs of this appear, the parents begin to suspect that something is not right in the child's development. When the baby's problems become more and more abnormal, the inevitable diagnosis comes. This period of discovering the disorder involves a complex and continuous struggle, during which the parents report higher than average levels of mental stress, anxiety and anger, which sometimes also affect their physical health (Gentles et al., 2020).

The difficulties of the child with ASD in

the various areas - social, communicative and behavioral - pose many challenges to his parents. In the research literature it is reported that parents of a child with ASD experience high levels of emotional burden, stress, depression, self-blame, low satisfaction in the parent-child relationship and difficulty in managing the child's behavior (Chau and Furness, 2023).

Parents report difficulty in dealing with their child's unusual behaviors (such as angry outbursts in the face of changes in routine), a feeling of burden and exhaustion due to the multiple tasks associated with caring for the child, and a negative effect of the child's difficulties on the rest of the family (Karst and Van Hecke, 2012). Siblings of children with ASD also often show difficulties in emotional, social and behavioral adaptation (Park et al., 2023). Another difficulty that parents face relates to the child's communication difficulties, which begin in the first stages of the bonding process between the child and the parent. This process is accompanied by many difficulties, such as improper eye contact, the absence of a smile, reluctance in physical contact, and reluctance in joint mutual activity.

All of this challenge the parent in correctly identifying and understanding their child's desires and signals, and accordingly in satisfying an appropriate response to his intentions and needs (Teague et al., 2017). In fact, the literature reports that ASD is the disorder that produces the greatest parental stress of all neurodevelopmental disorders (Pastor-Cerezuela et al., 2020). The difficulties the parents face have a noticeable effect on them throughout their lives, they usually need support and receiving services that will help them improve their functioning at home, at school and in the community. Parents who do not receive services to support them and who fail to return to stability and balance in the face of the many

stressors, find it difficult to make progress in achieving family goals, which may lead to a crisis in the family (Shepherd et al., 2020).

Studies indicate that the mother is a central figure in dealing with the difficulties of the disabled child in the family. She will often be the first person to communicate with the child, and the child's disability may threaten her perception of her role as a mother and her maternal experience due to the complex reality in which she finds herself - the emotional ambivalence accompanying her experiences and the demand on her to function responsibly (Kiani et al., 2022). Mothers of children with ASD see themselves as the main ones dealing with the daily tasks of raising the child, and often experience agony stemming from the feeling of not doing enough, emotional burden, frustration and worries for the future (Papadopoulos, 2021).

Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs a person has about his abilities and the results of his efforts in different situations. This belief includes the mobilization of motivation, cognitive resources, and actions necessary to master the demands of the task (Bandura, 1977). Based on this definition, various researchers developed the concept of "parental self-efficacy", which refers to the parent's assessment of himself as being able to fulfill the tasks related to the demands of his role as a parent, to deal with difficulties during the development of his child, and to understand his child's environment so that it will optimally advance him in his life path (Sarwar et al., 2019).

Accordingly, maternal self-efficacy is mothers' belief in their ability to be successful mothers to their children. This belief includes the ability to understand the needs of their children, respond to these needs, and reach a desired result to promote their development (Goldberg, 2018). The relationship between mother and child is essential for both - mother and child. Mothers need to feel

successful in raising their child, and when they manage to meet the child's needs and create positive interactions with him, they feel a higher sense of maternal self-efficacy. However, when they feel less self confidence in caring for the baby, understanding the child and his needs and the interaction with him is negative, performing the maternal role could be very difficult, the anxiety level increases and the sense of maternal self-efficacy decreases (Smith, 2020; Tognasso et al., 2022).

In studies that examined the maternal self-efficacy of mothers of children with ASD, it was found that their self-efficacy is low compared to the self-efficacy of mothers of children with typical development and compared to fathers of children with ASD. A negative relationship was also found between the maternal self-efficacy and emotional stress, depression, feelings of guilt, frustration, helplessness, parental distress and dissatisfaction with life, when normal family functioning and social support were found to help increase the maternal self-efficacy (Benedetto and Ingrassia, 2021; Zavodny-Jackson et al., 2022).

Mothers with a higher sense of maternal self-efficacy feel confident in raising their child and manage to respond to the challenges involved in raising him in a good way, while mothers with a low sense of maternal self-efficacy tend to experience negative emotions such as anxiety and stress in raising their child and find it difficult to respond appropriately to his needs (Chen et al., 2022). It was also found that mothers of children with ASD who were more involved in promoting their children's development showed a higher sense of maternal self-efficacy, while mothers who reported feeling guilty for not doing enough for their children showed a low sense of maternal self-efficacy. A high sense of maternal self-efficacy was found to be a predictor of the child's participation in daily

activities, such as motor and social activities, and is considered to contribute to the child's development of a sense of well-being (Avrech-Bar et al., 2016).

Life satisfaction includes two components: happiness and well-being. Accordingly, personal life satisfaction can be described as the feeling of happiness that a person has when he achieves the level of well-being he desires (Maddux, 2017). Amati et al. (2018) added that life satisfaction refers to a person's subjective holistic evaluation of his life. A person determines the satisfaction with his life through a judgment process in which he evaluates the quality of his life based on criteria he has chosen as important to him (Kiani et al., 2022). Among these criteria are tolerance for the problems a person encounters in his life and perceiving them as a resource for experience and learning, the realization of desired goals, and the ability to overcome sad events during life (Sholihin et al., 2022).

Another important criterion found in the research literature as related to life satisfaction refers to satisfaction with family life and health (Milovanska-Farrington and Farrington, 2021). Few studies have focused on the life satisfaction of mothers of children with ASD. These studies highlighted the parental stress of mothers, leading to a decrease in satisfaction with their lives. This stress may be the result of dealing with challenging behaviors of the child with ASD that have been found to predict maternal depression (Roubinov et al., 2022).

In a literature review in the field (Rahayu et al., 2022), it was found that mothers experience more parental stress than fathers. The reason for this lies in internal and external factors. The internal factors refer to the mothers' difficulty communicating with children who have developmental disorders, understanding the

diagnosis given by professionals and presenting appropriate coping strategies. The external factors relate to the stigma of the environment on the condition of children with developmental disorders, discrimination, isolation and lack of support from the environment, insufficient therapeutic services, inappropriate behavior of the child in society and his lack of independence, leading to dependence on his mother even at a late age.

These factors increase the stress and tension in the lives of the mothers and make it difficult for them to rest, get and keep a job, and create normal social and marital relationships. The life satisfaction of mothers of children with ASD was found to be low compared to mothers of children with typical development and compared to mothers of children with a specific learning disorder (Kiani et al., 2022). It was also found that social support, optimism, hope and a high maternal self-efficacy are positively related to the life satisfaction of mothers of children with ASD (Hamama, 2023; Sarwar et al., 2019; Xiao-bin et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the literature review provides information on the coping of mothers of children with ASD. Autistic spectrum disorder is a disorder that entails difficulties in diverse areas that produce particularly great parental stress. Usually, the mother is the closest person to the child, and she experiences her parental role in a complex, tormented and even threatening way. Studies have found that this experience damages her maternal self-efficacy, her mental health and her satisfaction with her life. The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between the maternal self-efficacy and the life satisfaction among mothers of children with ASD and mothers of children with typical development. Based on the findings of the studies cited above, the hypotheses of the current study are derived: (1) A positive relationship

will be found between the maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction among mothers. The higher the maternal self-efficacy, the more the mothers will report a higher satisfaction with life; (2) There will be differences in the maternal self-efficacy between mothers of children with ASD and between mothers of children with typical development. The mothers of children with typical development will report a higher maternal self-efficacy; and (3) There will be differences in life satisfaction between mothers of children with ASD and between mothers of children with typical development. Mothers of children with typical development will report higher life satisfaction.

The uniqueness of the study is in the examination of the experience of mothering children with ASD among mothers in Israel, in light of the scant research literature on this subject. In addition, the current study examines the relationship between two important areas: the maternal self-efficacy and the satisfaction with life, a relationship about which there is little research both in the context of mothers in general and in the context of mothers of children with ASD, in particular. Through the research findings, it will be possible to better learn about the inner world of the mothers of children with ASD. This learning will help multi-professional teams working in educational settings with children with ASD to better understand the children's mothers and make decisions about appropriate ways of working that will allow them to be accommodated and supported.

SUBJECTS AND METHOD

1. Study Design

The study is a quantitative study conducted in Israel.

2. Population and Sample

The sample consisted of 125 mothers, of which 61 were mothers of children with ASD

and 64 were mothers of children with typical development. The maternal age of children with ASD ranges from 26-59 years (Mean=41.24; SD=8.29), the maternal age of children with typical development ranges from 29-59 years (Mean=38.79; SD=7.26). In the test done to check the differences in maternal age between the groups, no significant differences were found, $t(118) = 1.725$; $p = 0.090$.

3. Study Variables

The study examined the maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction as independent variables. The dependent variable comprised the motherhood of a child with ASD or motherhood of a child with typical development.

4. Operational Definition of Variables

Maternal self-efficacy is mothers' belief in their ability to be successful mothers to their children. This belief includes the ability to understand the needs of their children, respond to these needs, and reach a desired result to promote their development.

Life satisfaction is the feeling of happiness that a person has when he achieves the level of well-being he desires.

Motherhood of children with ASD is motherhood of a child with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. The disorder has two main components: consistent impairment in social communication and social interactions and limited repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities.

5. Study Instrument

Two questionnaires were used in the research: (1) Life satisfaction questionnaire- The questionnaire was developed by Winter (2015) as an adaptation of Diener's questionnaire- Satisfaction with Life Scale- SWLS (1984). The questionnaire measures the degree of satisfaction with life and includes seven statements. The subject must answer how well each statement corresponds to his thoughts and feelings during the past few weeks (for example: I have a good life; I have

everything I want in life). The answers appear on a 4-point Likert scale. Where 1 means never matches, and 4 means almost always matches. An average score in the questionnaire is calculated for each subject, so a high score indicates high satisfaction with life. In the current study, the internal consistency of the questionnaire (Cronbach's alpha) was obtained at $\alpha = 0.797$; (2) Maternal self-efficacy questionnaire- The questionnaire was compiled for the purpose of the study by Habayib (2017), and its purpose is to examine the maternal self-efficacy. The questionnaire includes 23 statements that describe various actions that make up the role of the mother, where each subject was required to mark her degree of confidence in performing these actions successfully (for example: to calm my child when he is in distress). The answers appear on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 means not confident at all and 5 is very confident. An average score in the questionnaire is calculated for each subject, so a high score indicates a high maternal self-efficacy. In the present study, the internal consistency of the questionnaire (Cronbach's alpha) was obtained at $\alpha = 0.954$. In addition to the two questionnaires, the mothers were asked to indicate their age and whether they have a child with ASD or not.

6. Data Analysis

The relationship between maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction was analyzed using Pearson's correlations. The differences between mothers of children with ASD and between mothers and children with typical development in their maternal self-efficacy and their satisfaction with their lives, were analyzed using independent samples t-tests.

7. Research Ethics

The participants were sampled for the study using a non-probability sampling method of the convenience and snowball type. The questionnaires were distributed through an online link built in the Google Forms

application. The distribution was done in three ways: by publishing the research among close and distant dating circles; through sending a message in a WhatsApp group of parents of children with disabilities that the researchers are members of, in which only mothers of children with ASD were asked to answer the questionnaire; and through advertising on the researchers' Facebook page. The questionnaire was answered anonymously. It was stated in the questionnaire that the data collected is for research purposes only and the details of the participants will remain confidential. In addition, it was noted that they have the right to withdraw at any stage of filling out the questionnaire and even to waive their participation in the study.

RESULTS

The first research hypothesis referred to the relationship between the maternal self-efficacy and the life satisfaction among mothers. This relationship was tested using Pearson's correlations, and the findings suggest a significant positive relationship between the two variables, $r = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$. In other words, mothers who reported a high maternal self-efficacy also reported high satisfaction with their lives.

In order to test the second and third research hypotheses, which referred to the differences between mothers of children with ASD and between mothers and children with typical development in their maternal self-efficacy and their satisfaction with their lives, independent samples t-tests were conducted. Figure 1 shows the findings: In figure 1 it can be seen that the life satisfaction among mothers of children with typical development (Mean= 3.09; SD= 0.52) is higher, as estimated, than the life satisfaction of mothers of children with ASD (Mean= 2.82; SD= 0.56). In the analysis, the differences were found to be significant $t_{(123)}$

= 2.69, $p = 0.010$. Regarding the differences between the maternal self-efficacy of the mothers of children with typical development (Mean= 4.47; SD= 0.49) and the

maternal self-efficacy of the mothers of children with ASD (Mean= 4.31; SD= 0.64), the differences were not found to be significant $t_{(123)} = 1.52, p=0.130$.

Table 1. Maternal self-efficacy and the life satisfaction of the mothers with and without ASD

Maternal self-efficacy	Mean	SD	t	p
The mothers of children with typical development	4.47	0.49	1.52	0.131
The mothers of children with ASD	4.31	0.64		
Life Satisfaction				
The mothers of children with typical development	3.09	0.52	2.69	0.008*
The mothers of children with ASD	2.82	0.56		

* $p < 0.010$

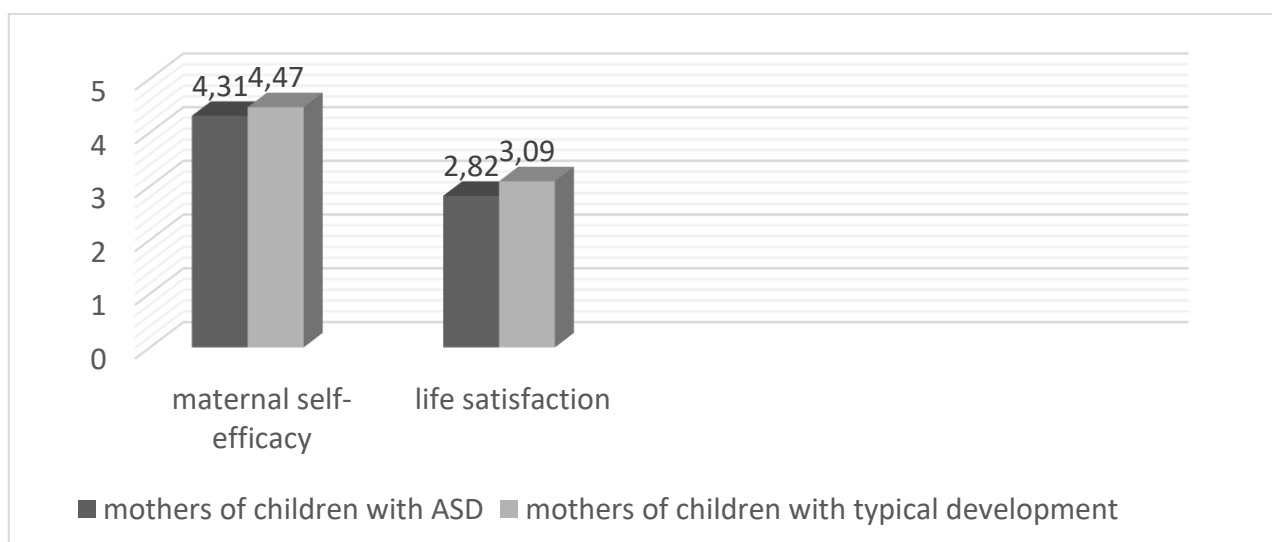


Figure 1. Differences in the maternal self-efficacy and life Satisfaction among mothers of children with ASD and mothers of children with typical development

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to examine the experience of mothering children with ASD compared to mothering children with typical development. The study examines the relationship between two important areas: the maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction, a relationship about which there is little research both in the context of mothers in general and mothers of children with ASD particular. In addition, the differences between mothers of children with ASD and mothers of children with typical development in the two areas

were examined.

The relationship between maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction

The first research hypothesis was that a positive relationship would be found between the maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction among the mothers. Based on the term "self-efficacy" proposed by Bandura (Bandura, 1977), a maternal self-efficacy is described as mothers' belief in their ability to be successful mothers to their children, to interact positively with their children, to understand their needs, to respond to these needs and to reach a

desired outcome to promote their development (Goldberg, 2018).

A high maternal self-efficacy is reported in the research literature to be associated with high self-esteem of the mother, high esteem of her child, and low levels of parental anxiety and stress (Smith, 2020). As hypothesized in the present study, mothers who reported a high maternal self-efficacy also reported high satisfaction with their lives. It seems that mothers with a high maternal self-efficacy feel that they are able to perform tasks related to the demands of their role as a mother and to provide the best response to their children's needs.

As a result, they feel satisfied with their parental role and the relationship with their child, and these feelings lead to satisfaction with their lives. Life satisfaction was found in previous studies to be related to satisfaction with family life and the ability to overcome problems and difficult events during life (Milovanska-Farrington and Farrington, 2021; Sholihin, et al., 2022). It can be assumed that mothers in the current study who reported a high maternal self-efficacy feel that they manage to cope with difficulties and experience greater satisfaction from their family life, and therefore their satisfaction with life is greater.

Differences in the maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction between mothers of children with ASD and mothers of children with typical development

The other two research hypotheses focused on the differences in the maternal self-efficacy and the life satisfaction between mothers of children with ASD and mothers of children with typical development. The hypothesis was that the mothers of children with ASD would report both a low sense of maternal self-efficacy and a low degree of satisfaction with life compared to mothers of children with typical development. The

hypotheses were based on previous studies that found that among mothers of children with ASD, the maternal self-efficacy is lower (Benedetto and Ingrassia, 2021; Zavodny-Jackson et al., 2022), and the degree of life satisfaction is lower (Kiani et al., 2022).

In the current study, mothers of children with ASD reported, as an estimate, a lower degree of satisfaction compared to mothers of children with typical development. Although few studies have examined the life satisfaction of mothers of children with ASD, many studies have reported on the complex parenting experience of these mothers, characterized by loneliness, depression, stress and pressure that affect their mental health (including: Rahayu et al., 2022; Roubinov et al., 2022). It seems that the communication, social and behavioral difficulties of the child with ASD challenge the mother and directly affect the satisfaction with her life.

This finding requires interventional treatment for these mothers. Regarding the differences in the maternal self-efficacy between mothers of children with ASD and mothers of children with typical development, in the current study, contrary to what was assumed, no significant differences were found between the two groups of mothers. As mentioned, the hypothesis regarding a low sense of maternal self-efficacy among mothers of children with ASD was based on previous studies in the field that indicated a connection between a low maternal self-efficacy and various emotions experienced by the mother, such as depression, helplessness, frustration and guilt, parental distress and dissatisfaction with life. According to the researchers, all of these may affect the mother's security in meeting the child's needs. It is possible that the reason why no differences were found in the maternal self-efficacy between the two groups that participated in the present study

is related to the findings of Goldberg's study (Goldberg, 2018), which examined emotional aspects in the relationship between mothers and their children with ASD and found no connection between the maternal self-efficacy and the emotional connection between the mother and the child.

The researcher noted that the mother's report on the maternal self-efficacy does not necessarily characterize her feelings towards the child, and it is possible that the mother can feel confident in her ability to be a good and attentive parent to the child at the same time as discovering difficulty in connecting emotionally with him. This topic requires further research in the field. The findings in the present study can also be linked to the degree of assistance and support received by the participating mothers. In the present study the mothers were not asked about the degree of support and assistance they receive. In previous studies it was found that social support helps to increase the maternal self-efficacy.

The current study is another layer in the literature that attempts to examine the parental experience of mothers of children with ASD. Its uniqueness is a theoretical-research addition to a field about which there is little research, especially in Israel. Examining the maternal self-efficacy and the life satisfaction allows a glimpse into the inner world of mothers and an understanding of their maternal experience. The research findings may lead to the development of awareness of the difficulties of motherhood, to the removal of barriers and negative attitudes involving stigma towards these mothers, along with practical recommendations for the support and assistance of multi-professional teams in motherhood. Many researchers (including: Hamama, 2023; Sarwar et al., 2019; Xiao-bin et al., 2022; Zavodny et al., 2022) reinforce the need to build unique intervention and

support programs for mothers of children with ASD.

These programs will provide a supportive environment that will enhance the mother's sense of self-efficacy, will provide guidance in dealing with the children's challenging behaviors, and will provide an answer to the high levels of parental pressure and stress that these mothers experience. This will improve their level of satisfaction with life. An example of one of the programs that appears in the research literature is a program that was implemented among mothers of children with ASD (Kubo et al., 2021), with the aim of improving the bond between mother and child and establishing confidence in their relationship.

The program helped strengthen the mother's sense of self-efficacy, improved the mother's mental health and reduced the child's emotional and behavioral problems as reported by the mother. It therefore seems that targeted interventions may help mothers experience feelings of success with their child. According to Bandura (Bandura, 1977), experimenting and experiencing a sense of success increases the motivation to act and strengthens a person's sense of ability. Mothers with a high sense of maternal self-efficacy can choose a more suitable type of care for the child and respond to the challenges of raising him in a better way, thereby reducing parental stress and increasing life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2022).

Therefore, the contribution of the intervention programs is reflected both in the child's own advancement in the various fields and in strengthening the sense of parental self-efficacy and the mother's sense of mental well-being.

The multi-professional team has a central place in the educational settings for ASD students. It is important that this team

be exposed to the inner world of mothers, something that will make it possible to work with them in a coordinated and cooperative manner. A program to improve collaborative communication between educational teams and parents of children on the autistic continuum was found to contribute to parents receiving information about their children and strengthening their sense of parental competence (Azad et al., 2021).

The place of the staff members in establishing cooperative relations with parents in general, and with mothers in particular, is very significant. The involvement of mothers in the child's education and care program through routine and prolonged training programs, may enhance their ability to function as significant mothers to their child, receive tools to deal with challenging behaviors, and progress to a state of growth and satisfaction with their lives.

Based on the findings of the present study, several limitations can be noted and additional research directions can be recommended in the areas examined: (1) Only mothers of children with ASD participated in the current study. In a follow-up study, it is important to investigate the fathers of children with ASD, this in light of studies (Rahayu et al., 2022) that reported coping and a different sense of parental self-efficacy related to gender. This study will be able to shed a wider light on the parental experience of mothers and fathers of children with ASD; (2) Only quantitative research tools were used in the current study. There is room to continue researching the examined areas using additional measurement tools, and it is desirable to use qualitative tools such as interviews. These tools may present a more holistic and broader picture of the experience of mothering a child with ASD in the areas examined - maternal self-efficacy and life satisfaction; (3) In the present study, the child's age of the children with ASD, his

place in the family, whether there is another child with a disability in the family and the number of children in the family were not examined. It is possible that these data will influence the answers of the mothers. In future research it is recommended to test the relationship between these data and the maternal self-efficacy and the satisfaction with life of the mothers; and (4) Mothers of children with ASD participated in the current study, but the level of functioning of the children was not tested. In the research literature, it is reported that the lower the child's level of functioning and the more difficult his behaviors, the more parental stress the parents demonstrate (Pastor-Cerezuela et al., 2020). Therefore, in future research it is important to examine the level of functioning of the children.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

None.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest to be declared.

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