**“AUTISM IS LIFELONG” - THE PARENTAL EXPERIENCE**

**Nadine Minott, Kirsten Penrose, Kelly Carr, Patti Weir, Nadia R. Azar, Chad A. Sutherland and Sean Horton**

**APEX Research Group, Department of Kinesiology, University of Windsor**

**Objectives:**

The prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been increasing within our society. Parents, specifically mothers of children with ASD have been known to experience elevated levels of stress, depression, and anxiety, which is further exacerbated by the presence of maladaptive behaviours often occurring with a co-diagnosis of intellectual disability (ID). Current research is primarily focused on developing services, resources, and supports for children and youth with ASD-ID. However, ASD-ID is a lifelong disorder, resulting in many living with their parents throughout adulthood. This transition into adulthood raises concerns for the future with respect to parents’ own aging process, as well as availability and suitability of services, as various needs may change with age. Previous literature indicates that over time, parents develop adaptive abilities to alleviate stress through positive coping strategies. However, knowledge regarding the contextual experience of parenting adults with ASD-ID is limited. Delving into the lived experiences of mothers from a strengths-based perspective provided a rich and novel narrative of parenting an adult child with ASD-ID.

**Methodology:**

This study employed a social constructivist epistemology. A strengths-based perspective guided the research design to challenge the traditional deficits-based approach that views ASD-ID as a ‘burden’. Ten mothers of adult children (21 years of age or older) diagnosed with ASD-ID completed two semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the initial interview was meant to build rapport between the participant and researcher, followed by a second in-depth interview to aid in the sharing of intimate details. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

**Results:**

Preliminary analysis yielded 4 themes which have been given context through participant quotes provided in parentheses. These themes include: (1) empathy (“he has made us all better people, we have a better understanding now" and “when I have a child with autism in my class I just feel very connected in more than one way with that child”), 2) resilience (“he has taught us all to persevere” and “you learn to cope and adapt the best you can”), (3) uncertainty regarding the future (“I don’t think it’s going to be healthy for him to be living with an old lady” and “there is not much set up in community… our government doesn’t understand that autism is lifelong. Hopefully there will be something else happening in the future. I don’t know how it will look”, (4) child-centered (“he is a part of the fabric of our life” and “I’m so involved and so much more because of him”).

**Discussion/Conclusion:**

Findings provide detailed accounts of mothers of adult children with ASD-ID and their lived experiences, as their child transitions into adulthood, showcasing their current strengths, personal growth, and the resources available to them. However, fears related to their own aging and how that intersects with their child’s future over the lifespan remain. Enhanced understanding of their lived experiences may encourage the development of new services, challenge current outlets of support, and highlight the need for specific changes within communities and service sector agencies.

**Correspondence:**

**Nadine Minott**

**University of Windsor**

**401 Sunset Ave.,**

**Windsor ON, N9B 3P4**

**minott1@uwindsor.ca**