**AUTISM AFTER THE AGE OF 18: INVESTIGATING MOTHERS’ PERSPECTIVES**

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**Objectives:** Despite 80% of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) being 18 years of age or older, there remains a lack of research focused on ASD in adulthood, specifically pertaining to the experience of parental caregivers. While a current paradigm shift may be initiating movement away from a deficit-based narrative towards a positive re-framing of disability, limitations remain in policies, services, and resources that address the lifelong challenges facing adults with ASD who ‘age out’ of formalized supports. Thus, parents are faced with a ‘service cliff’ along with a dearth of information related to caring for their adult children. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to employ a strength-based perspective while examining the lived experience of mothers caring for their adult child with ASD and an intellectual disability (ID).

**Methodology:** Ten mothers (Mage = 47.2 years; 8 employed, 2 retired) of adult, male children (Mage = 27.6) diagnosed with ASD-ID completed a semi-structured interview (1 to 2 hours in duration). Adult children co-resided with their mothers (6), lived in group homes (2), or in alternate living arrangements (2). A strengths-based perspective, which emphasizes abilities and resources, guided the research design. This is in contrast to the traditional, deficits-based approach which tends to focus on problems and pathology and which views ASD-ID as a ‘burden’. As such, the interview guide probed mothers to discuss strengths, available resources, and overcoming challenges. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

**Results:** Interviews yielded two themes, each accompanied by three subthemes, and were given context through participant quotes. The first theme, **Transition to Adulthood,** encompassed: (1) *autism is lifelong* - “People think autism stops at 18, but it doesn’t.”, (2) *suitability/availability of supportive services -* “They turn 12 and [services] start getting lower. Then these kids turn 18 and there is nothing.”, and (3) *cost/funding* - “Day programs cost $140 a day. Add that up... [child] doesn’t get anywhere close to that.” The second theme, **Uncertainty Regarding the Future**, included: (1) *aging caregivers* - “As I age, it's very scary because I'm not going to be as agile and outgoing.”, (2) *residence considerations* - “My goal for him would be to live independently, but one of my boys said they'll take him, but that's not carved in stone.”, and (3) *permanency planning* - “You don't know what's going to happen when you're not here and you have to make sure that that's all set in place. So that's a big fear. When I'm gone, who’s going to take care of him?”

**Discussion/Conclusion:** Mothers’ lifelong caregiving experiences often involves a delicate balance between their personal aging process and the changing needs of their child throughout adulthood. While this study confirmed the ‘service cliff’, it also revealed that the mothers’ own aging processes were benefited by their adult children who provided close companionship, help with household tasks, and purposeful community engagement through advocacy. The mothers adopted elements of a strength-based approach when caring for their adult children with ASD-ID.

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