

## From deficits to strengths: Mothers' lived experiences of recognizing and nurturing talents in children with autism spectrum disorder



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### ABSTRACT

Although research on autism has expanded rapidly, it is still mainly based on deficit-oriented frameworks that emphasize limitations rather than strengths. This phenomenological study explores mothers' lived experiences in identifying and supporting the hidden talents and strengths of their children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) within the Saudi sociocultural context. Nine mothers participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, which revealed five interconnected themes: (a) an initial "glimpse of hope" when abilities were first recognized; (b) limited recognition of children's strengths by institutions; (c) the development of home-based advocacy and informal strength-focused practices; (d) socially conditional acknowledgment of ASD-related talents; and (e) support for a strengths-based approach to education. The findings show that mothers play a central role as key observers and advocates of their children's strengths. They also highlight the need to make talents and strengths more visible in assessment and intervention practices.

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### 1. Introduction

Autism research has increasingly challenged the dominance of deficit-based frameworks of the diagnosis and interventions provided for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). These deficit-based frameworks focus on medical and behavioral models that concentrate on deficits and disabilities, and what individuals with ASD cannot do in comparison with their peers (Zeidan et al., 2022). In spite of the benefits of these deficit-based frameworks, they lack a broader understanding of autism development that includes strengths, interests, and exceptional capabilities (Austermann et al., 2025; Reis et al., 2024).

In response, educational research has been evolving by shifting from such a primarily deficit-oriented perspective to the direction of placing greater attention on children's strengths and talents (Murthi et al., 2023). Supporters of this approach emphasized that many individuals with ASD exhibit unique talents, such as advanced memory, attention

to detail, or creative problem-solving abilities that deserve greater recognition (Lee et al., 2024; Ferreira et al., 2024). However, many practices based on talents and strengths are still largely theoretical (Foley-Nicpon and Assouline, 2020; White et al., 2025).

The term twice-exceptionality (2e) appears increasingly in the literature of gifted and talented education, which refers to individuals who show exceptional capabilities as well as synchronous disabilities such as ASD. The concept of 2e provides a vision about the size of the complexity that can be confronted when studying cases of individuals with ASD, that many show multiple needs which require a focus on their talents and strengths in addition to the difficulties they face (Trail, 2022). Recognizing the talents and strengths of children with ASD still faces great challenges due to the limited diagnostic frameworks, negative cultural expectations, and limited training regarding the identification of their talents and strengths (Gelbar et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2024). There is ambiguity with the public about who is considered 2e, and how their strengths can be developed in parallel with their challenges. This ambiguity continues to raise questions and theoretical and practical dilemmas for both teachers and service providers (Baum et al., 2021).

Although most current research has focused on institutional practices and professional views, there is still relatively little attention and lower support

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for the families of children with ASD. Mothers, in particular, should have special attention as they are commonly busy trying to overcome successive difficulties in following up their children's growth paths (Smith-Young et al., 2022). Research has widely shown the psychological pressure of mothers, emotional burden, and societal adaptation problems (Alkhateeb et al., 2022; Papadopoulos, 2021; Santiago et al., 2024). However, fewer studies focused on investigating mothers' perceptions of their children with ASD's talents and strengths.

Families, and mothers in particular, have the potential to play a critical role in identifying and developing their children's hidden capabilities (Smith-Young et al., 2022). This is due to the role played by mothers as the child's care provider, which allows them to observe and recognize the presence of talent in their children. Mothers' observations often precede the formal evaluation, which, unfortunately, often focuses only on deficits and weaknesses. In such cases, mothers are not welcomed to express their knowledge about the talents and strengths of their children to be evaluated and officially recognized. Moreover, mothers often face internal conflicts when trying to balance between realizing the challenges of their children and defending their abilities, especially when support is directed at the difficulties and disabilities of their children. As White et al. (2026) noted, the dual role of the mother as a care provider and supporter can give mothers strength and exhaustion at the same time.

These gaps in the literature are particularly evident in non-Western cultural contexts, where autism and talent are interpreted through distinct cultural and social lenses. Societal awareness of autism and related disability concepts is still limited in Saudi Arabia (Alrajhi and Dimitriou, 2023; Alsamani et al., 2026; Alyami et al., 2022; Sulaimani and Mursi, 2022; Daghestani, 2019). And the educational systems in Saudi Arabia rarely integrate strength-based intervention that suits 2e students, including children with ASD. Such context leaves parents without sufficient institutional support for their children with ASD. These cultural contexts may play a role in framing Saudi mothers' experiences in nurturing their children with ASD. For many mothers, the care of their children is perceived as part of their religious life (Alkhateeb et al., 2022). This spiritual perspective may provide an emotional basis, but it seems that it does not compensate for the cultural obstacles facing mothers in the pursuit of finding learning and development opportunities for their children.

Exploring the mothers' experiences in recognizing and nurturing their children's strengths may help in creating a better picture of the dynamics of parenting for children with ASD. This study seeks to explore such a maternal perspective within the Saudi cultural context. This phenomenological study aims to explore Saudi mothers' lived experiences of recognizing and nurturing the hidden talents and strengths of their children with ASD within the Saudi

sociocultural context. The research question that guides this study is:

How do Saudi mothers perceive and experience the recognition and nurturing of the hidden talents and strengths of their children with ASD within the Saudi sociocultural context?

## 2. Methods

The goal of the qualitative approach is to understand a human or social issue through drawing a complex picture of the phenomenon under study (Creswell and Poth, 2018). As the main goal of this study was to acquire a deep understanding of a phenomenon being lived by a group of individuals, the phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study (van Manen, 2023). The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2021) was followed to guide the analysis, as this approach provides the researchers with a central role in interpreting the study data. In this approach, meaning and results are seen as constructed by the participant and the researcher as well (Larkin et al., 2006). The IPA approach allows for capturing the depth and complexity of participants' subjective meaning and perceptions (Smith et al., 2021). It emphasizes in-depth exploration and rich interpretation of the lived experiences of recognizing and nurturing the hidden talents and strengths of their children with ASD within the Saudi sociocultural context.

### 2.1. Participants

This study included nine Saudi mothers of children with a formal diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who also exhibit talents and/or strengths at the same time. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure a rich and shared experience of the phenomenon (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Inclusion criteria required that participants: (a) be the biological or legal mothers of a child diagnosed with ASD, (b) identify the presence of observable talents and/or strengths in their child, and (c) demonstrate active involvement in their child's developmental and educational support. All participants were from four different cities in Saudi Arabia and represented several educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. All nine mothers participated in in-depth interviews seeking depth of analysis of their experiences (Smith et al., 2021). The nine participants provided sufficient data saturation, allowing the researcher to conduct detailed case-by-case analyses. All participants were mothers of a child with ASD and caregivers as well. Table 1 shows demographic data of all participants.

### 2.2. Data gathering

Data were gathered through individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in Arabic as

the participants' native language to ensure comfort and authenticity of expression. Interviews were conducted over a period of three months at the beginning of 2025. All were conducted by either face-to-face or phone call, depending on participant

preference and accessibility. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded for the purpose of transcription with informed consent.

**Table 1: Participant demographics**

Mother	Mother age (year)	Educational level	Mother employment	Marital status	Gender	Child age	Diagnosis age	City
P1	50	High school	Homemaker	Married	Male	14y	4y	Hail
P2	40	University degree	Administrative job	Married	Male	11y	2y 7m	Hail
P3	29	University degree	Homemaker	Married	Male	5y	3y	Hail
P4	47	University degree	Teacher	Married	Male	13y	2.5y	Hail
P5	40	University degree	Homemaker	Separated	Female	5y	2y 4m	Hail
P6	42	University degree	Administrative job	Separated	Male	15y	1y 6m	Jeddah
P7	48	Middle school	Homemaker	Married	Male	9y	2y 6m	Hail
P8	38	University degree	Homemaker	Married	Female	6y	3y	Al-Khobar
P9	50	University degree	Teacher	Married	Male	7y	4y	Dammam

The interview protocol reflected the literature regarding strengths-based parenting and cultural caregiving experiences in autism (Papadopoulos, 2021; Lee et al., 2024). Interview questions were purposefully general in design at the beginning, allowing participants to share their views freely. The researcher also attempted to encourage participants to reveal their experiences in recognizing and nurturing their children's talents and strengths, the barriers that they may have encountered, and the impact of cultural beliefs on their care practices. Flexibility within the semi-structured interview allowed for clarification of experiences that were more important to participants.

### 2.3. Data analysis

The author and a qualitative research peer with autism expertise independently analyzed the transcripts following the interpretative phenomenological analysis suggested by Smith et al. (2021). The data analysis process followed multiple steps, beginning with the initial reading and familiarization of data, in which each transcript was read repeatedly and individually by both the researcher and his peer to gain a wide understanding of participants' experiences. Exploratory noting and open coding were then generated to capture emerging insights. Next, we clustered the developed initial codes into themes that reflect participants' common meaning of their lived experiences. Then we examined conjunctions, locating language units into categories. Thereafter, we investigated each category to determine whether it should remain or be merged with another category. After completing this process, the central phenomenon has emerged, and selective coding was used to confirm its relevance (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

### 2.4. Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the researchers employed multiple strategies during the process of implementing this study (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The design of this study was built on providing rich and thick descriptions of participants'

views by sharing their actual wording throughout the results section. This way is important to increase the transferability by enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings. To ensure credibility, Participants were provided with a summary of their transcripts to verify the accuracy and authenticity of interpretations. Peer review was also applied to support dependability and confirmability during data collection, data analysis to examine emerging interpretations, and to protect against researcher bias.

## 3. Findings

The central phenomenon of this study revolved around the Saudi mothers' lived experiences of recognizing and nurturing the hidden talents and strengths of their children with ASD within the Saudi sociocultural context. Five main themes emerged from analyzing the in-depth interviews. The themes cover interrelated dimensions of a broader narrative of recognition, frustration, and hope. An overview of the emerging themes with representative quotes is shown in Table 2.

### 3.1. A glimpse of hope: Discovering ability within disability

The first theme describes the emotional shift participants experienced when they first noticed a talent or strength in their child with ASD. Seven mothers reflected on that experience as a positive turning moment and a glimpse of hope when they began to see a clear potential in their child. Recognizing a talent in their children provides these mothers with hope and relief in a journey often filled with diagnoses and therapy plans that may put tremendous pressure on these mothers. P8 described the emotional impact of such a moment: "It felt like the first time I saw something joyful in my son ... there's something else, something joyful." Her reflection indicated that she began in that moment to reframe the entire experience of mothering a child with ASD, that her child has something to offer and others to respect and may be admired. A similar experience was shared by P6, "The first time I saw him finish that game, the game he likes, quickly, it

felt like a glimpse of hope, happiness ... I hadn't felt in a long time."

These realizations often carry deep emotions that increase the level of confidence in the child's capability. P3 expressed how her discovery of her child's talent helped her cope and reframe the emotional burden she had been carrying for a long time, "His talent gave me breath ... it made all the exhaustion feel worth it." P2 shared a different experience and described how external recognition from a teacher helped solidify this new view of her child, "When the specialist complimented his drawing, I felt like my son finally had a place ... as he belonged somewhere, like everyone else." Such recognition from others carried significant reinforcement and power. It allowed these mothers to see their children as worthy of celebration. This theme reflected on the positive effect on mothers when light is shed on the talents and strengths their children may possess.

### 3.2. The blind institution

The second theme captures the tension experienced by mothers between how they perceive their children's talents and strengths and the failure of professionals to acknowledge or respond to these strengths. This theme was evident in the narratives of seven mothers, who expressed disappointment and frustration that professionals focused on their child's deficits while ignoring positive attributes or abilities that they see in their children, and think it should be taken into consideration during assessment and when planning educational interventions. Mothers described being alone in seeing their children's interests and talents in the assessment and intervention. They found that these strength-based observations were not taken seriously by professionals. P9, for instance, shared, "No one asked me what he likes or is good at. It's always about what's wrong with him ... I told them he's really fast with numbers and math ... this is important."

Similarly, P8 expressed disappointment when her daughter's talent for memorization went unacknowledged: "The whole diagnostic report was negative. There was no focus on the fact that she draws or memorizes quickly." P8 indicated that the institution's framing of the child through a deficit-based model erases meaningful parts of her identity. P2 echoed this experience when she was talking about her experience during the diagnosis of her child, "They all talk about his speech and behavior

issues ... what about what he's good at? No one cares [about his strength]." P3 described her efforts to advocate for her child's artistic ability, "I told them he's good at drawing, maybe that could help in learning." Participants, in general, were unhappy with how diagnoses and interventions focused only on the deficits their children possess and ignored what strengths they show, and could be worth considering as their peers. Mothers see this point from a perspective that benefits both the child and the mother at the same time.

### 3.3. Maternal advocacy for hidden talents and strengths

This theme evolved around the discourse of six mothers who described how they became the primary advocates in recognizing and nurturing their children's talents and interests. As a result of feeling overlooked, mothers began to advocate and create their own learning environments at home without any external help.

P5, for example, spoke about her deep sense of responsibility to develop her son's visual-spatial skills, "I am the one working with him at home. I follow videos, I buy him special puzzles ... but I can't ignore what I see in him." Her words reflect a strong internal conviction that emerges from everyday interaction with the child. The mother, P5, decided to help her child based on her observations of her son's potential without professional support.

Similarly, P8 described her action when she noticed her daughter's interest in music, "When I saw how much she focused when I played songs, I began using music with her more." P3 described how her son's interest in drawing led her to make it the main learning activity that she created for her son, "He likes to draw ... so I started teaching numbers and many other things by guiding them to draw related things." These stories lead to a shared pattern that they attempt to fill the missing strength-based learning in education by providing alternative support at home. However, this form of advocacy often comes at a personal cost. Several mothers described feeling isolated or overwhelmed, carrying the dual burden of managing therapy for deficits while also creating space for growth in areas of strength. P2 put it plainly, "I feel like I'm walking this road alone. I want someone to help me grow his talent, not just fix his problems." It is felt during the interviews with these mothers that they hold a heavy responsibility in advocating for the interests of their children with ASD.

**Table 2:** Themes and representative quotes

Themes	Representative quotes
A glimpse of hope: Discovering ability within disability	"The first time I saw him finish that game quickly, it felt like a glimpse of hope, happiness ... I hadn't felt in a long time." (P6)
The blind institution	"No one asked me what he's good at. They only asked about his problems." (P9)
Maternal advocacy for hidden talents and strengths	"I am the one working with him at home. I follow videos, I buy him special puzzles ... but I can't ignore what I see in him." (P5)
Talent as a conditional route to social recognition	"People think I'm exaggerating or imagining things when I say she's good at something. It's like they don't believe a child with autism can be gifted." (P8)
A call for learning through strengths	"I hope the school designs lessons around each child's strengths ... this way, they want to learn." (P2)

### 3.4. Talent as a conditional route to social recognition

This theme highlights how the recognition of talent or ability in a child with ASD becomes an issue of negotiation for social acceptance. Six mothers of nine shared experiences and views related to this social subject. For many mothers, discovering a talent in their child is not only a personal issue but also a hopeful opportunity to reshape how others perceive the child and possibly the mother. P4 described the response she received when she tried to share her child's memorization skills with a group that is close to her: "They told me, 'Why didn't you focus on teaching him to talk first!'"

Similarly, P8 reflected on how difficult it was to share her daughter's talents and strengths with others, "People think I'm exaggerating or imagining things when I say she's good at something. It's like they don't believe a child with autism can be gifted." This experience of disbelief leads many mothers to internal conflict. While they want to affirm their child's strengths, they often fear being seen as naive, in denial, or desperate for validation. P1 expressed this tension clearly, "They used to see him as a problem. Now, when they see him drawing, they smile ... But I still feel like they're just being polite."

Even within extended family circles, mothers found it difficult to sustain conversations about their child's abilities without being redirected toward more conventional concerns. P3 shared, "I wanted to talk about how he's good with colors and shapes, but some of my relatives just kept asking about some issues he exhibits." These mothers were desperate, attempting to share their children's talents and strengths with others, so they may receive more positive and accepting views that see the child as a whole with something to offer.

### 3.5. A call for learning through strengths

This theme explores the mothers' collective aspiration for educational services that recognize, nurture, and integrate their children's talents and strengths into learning. All participants commented on issues and shared views that supported this theme throughout the interviews. This theme calls for an alternative educational intervention to deficit-centered educational models; a vision for a more personalized, meaningful, and empowering experience for children with ASD. Mothers described the current educational services as not welcoming to their children's talents and strengths. They were frustrated those schools and therapeutic institutions rarely utilized their children's strengths for engagement or development.

P7 summarized her discourse regarding the subject, "If schools used what they [children with autism] love, they would learn so much faster." Her statement underlines a common concern among participants regarding the gap between what their children receive at home and the approaches applied in classrooms. P9 expressed a similar view when she

noted that educators often neglect the child's passion to foster their talents, "My son loves numbers, it is good to use that to teach him other things ... he gets bored." These mothers, from their personal experiences with their children with ASD, believe in the addition of a strengths-based approach to education, building upon what the child already enjoys or is good at.

Some mothers see this approach as not just a preferable but a necessary step for learning. P4 reflected on that, "When they try to teach him things he doesn't care about, he barely responds. But when it's about what he loves, he focuses ... This may be the key." The emphasis on personal interests in children with ASD emerged repeatedly during the interviews with the mothers as a gateway to cognitive and emotional engagement. P2 shared her imagination of a classroom that is a child-centered "I hope the school designs lessons around each child's strengths ... this way, they want to learn." This reflects a deeper recognition that the current educational systems should move towards strengths-based models that could restore motivation.

## 4. Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of recognizing and nurturing the hidden talents and strengths of their children with ASD within the Saudi sociocultural context. Across five interlocking themes, mothers described: (a) a turning-point discovery that reframed their children beyond deficit narratives; (b) institutional blindness to their children's strengths; (c) a home-grown practice of advocacy and informal strength-based intervention; (d) socially conditional recognition of ASD talents; and (e) support for a vision for strengths-based education. These findings show mothers as primary knowers and advocates of their children's talents and strengths; the first to observe ability, the first to act on it, and the most persistent in defending it.

Mothers expressed deep frustration with the diagnostic and educational systems they experienced, as these systems continue to emphasize deficits while ignoring the strengths of their children. Their experiences agreed with recent literature that such assessments and service models often fail to pick up talents associated with the concept of twice-exceptionality (Trail, 2022; Lee et al., 2024). Participants also emphasized that supporting talents and strengths among children with ASD helps increase their motivation for learning and improve their social skills. These views are in line with recent research that emphasizes the various advantages of supporting talents and strengths for children with ASD (Ferreira et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024).

Mothers of ASD in this study felt they were alone, supporting and advocating for their children's talents and strengths. Their feeling of loneliness in this process of supporting strength-based learning repeats the previous results that the visions of

parents are often ignored in official planning and support efforts (Smith-Young et al., 2022). Mothers also emphasized the vital need for comprehensive models that recognize the need to address and talents to foster them.

Another main finding of the study was related to the social acceptance of these mothers and their ASD children within the Saudi sociocultural context. When these mothers attempted to speak and let others know about their children's talents, they received reactions of superficial praise or disbelief of such talents, until they witnessed the talent themselves. This shift in others' perceptions from showing empathy to respect reflects the potential transformative effect of displays of strength. Educating society about the potential that children with ASD may possess can play a critical role in challenging societal stigma. In general, maternal perspectives in this study suggested support for strength-based approaches in formal systems and educational plans that agree with recent research advocating for strengths-based educational approaches (White et al., 2025; Baum et al., 2021).

By introducing maternal experiences, this study offers a culturally based understanding of the need to recognize and nurture talents and strengths among children with ASD. These findings emphasize the need for parent-informed approaches that value the capabilities of their children with known or obvious disability. There should be a movement beyond defect-based frameworks toward the inclusion of models of fostering talent and strength-based approaches. Mothers and those who know the child closely should take part in the multiple assessments and interventions.

The findings of this study offer important implications and recommendations. First, current diagnostic and educational systems need to evolve to include areas of strength as well as areas of need. It also should include the identification of interests, talents, and strengths. To achieve this, professional training for educators, clinicians, and school psychologists should move beyond deficit-oriented paradigms and incorporate culturally responsive models that highlight potential and individuality. Furthermore, the presence of comprehensive learning curricula should be promoted, taking into account the learning styles most preferred by this group and allowing for interventions tailored to their interests and talents. In addition, integrating maternal perspectives into diagnostic and educational processes would enhance the quality of interventions. As they possess a unique position to deeply understand their children.

Future research should consider cross-cultural comparative studies that examine how different societies perceive the presence of giftedness and the concept of twice-exceptionality among individuals with ASD. Such research may assist in clarifying how sociocultural views affect the visibility and cultivation of talent within the ASD population. In addition, there is a need for research that aims to develop and validate educational assessment tools

designed to identify and accommodate the strengths, interests, and talents of children with ASD. Moreover, experimental research is recommended for future research to examine the effectiveness of educational and therapeutic programs that are built upon strengths and interests for children with ASD. It is also recommended that future research examine the impact of such strengths-based programs on engagement, self-efficacy, and academic performance.

This study has several limitations. First, due to the phenomenological research design, the number of participants consists of a small group of mothers from specific regions in Saudi Arabia, which may not include more diverse perspectives across different Saudi contexts. Second, the study purposively focused on only maternal voices, missing the perspectives of fathers, siblings, teachers, and the autistic children themselves. In addition, participants were from four cities, but the majority of participants were from one city in Saudi Arabia, which may affect the transferability of the study.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of mothers of children with ASD by focusing on issues that were highly meaningful to them. It provided insight into their caregiving experiences, especially in relation to recognizing and supporting their children's strengths and interests. For many mothers, identifying a child's talent was an important turning point that created new hope and motivation, helping them manage the challenging responsibilities of caring for and educating their children with ASD.

Despite this positive experience, the mothers expressed concern that diagnostic systems and institutional practices are still mainly deficit-focused and often overlook children's strengths. They emphasized that these strengths are important for developing interventions that improve motivation and create richer learning experiences. The findings also showed that community attitudes toward children with ASD were often influenced by assumptions about their limitations. However, when children's talents became visible, social attitudes often changed toward greater acceptance and appreciation.

Overall, these maternal experiences highlight the need for diagnostic, educational, and social systems that consistently recognize, value, and build on the strengths, talents, and interests of children with autism.

## Compliance with ethical standards

### Ethical considerations

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Hail University (Approval No. H-2025-991). Informed consent was

obtained from all participants prior to participation, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study.

### Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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