

THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT OF A CHILD WITH ADHD

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Abstract: Raising a child with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) represents a long-term and complex burden for families, significantly affecting parental mental health, family functioning, and daily parent-child interactions. The aim of this review article is to summarize current research findings on the family environment of children with ADHD, with a particular focus on parenting stress, parental mental health, and quality of life. The paper draws on recent quantitative and qualitative studies conducted across diverse cultural contexts and examines both risk and protective factors related to parents and the broader social environment. Special attention is paid to gender differences in caregiving burden, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role of socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, the article reviews intervention approaches targeting parents and families, including mindfulness-based programs, art therapy, family- and narrative-based interventions, group programs, and telehealth modalities. The reviewed evidence consistently indicates that targeted parental support is a crucial component of effective ADHD care and should be an integral part of multidisciplinary intervention strategies.

Keywords: ADHD, parenting stress, depression, anxiety, suicidal risk, well-being, quality of life, children,

1 Introduction

Raising a child with ADHD poses numerous challenges, particularly for parents and caregivers, and may affect overall family functioning, parent-child interaction, and parental mental health. Most studies mapping the family environment of children with ADHD focus on the level of parenting stress and overall psychological well-being among parents of children with ADHD, as well as associated risk and protective factors, including contextual factors (e.g., the pandemic, socioeconomic status, and the broader environment). Further research addresses ways to modify these factors through specific interventions aimed at improving parental well-being.

This article provides an overview of current knowledge in the field, focusing primarily on the mental health of parents of children with ADHD and potential interventions in this area. Parent-related factors: stress, mental health, well-being, and quality of life among parents of children with ADHD.

1.1 Parenting stress as a key factor

Parenting stress is conceptualized as a subjectively experienced psychological burden arising from the demands of the parenting role and childrearing, particularly when the parent perceives an imbalance between the demands placed on them and the resources, competencies, or support available to them (Abidin, 1992; Abidin, 1995). Among parents of children with ADHD, parenting stress is often amplified by the chronic nature of the child's difficulties, recurrent conflicts, increased demands on behavioral regulation, and frequent failure of typical parenting strategies (Abidin, 1995).

A quantitative study by Craig et al. (2016), conducted on a large sample of parents of children with neurodevelopmental disorders, aimed to compare levels of parenting stress across different clinical groups. The analysis showed that parents of children with ADHD exhibited among the highest levels of parenting stress, and mothers reported a greater burden than fathers (Craig et al., 2016). The authors explained this difference by noting that mothers often assume the primary role in managing the child's challenging behavior on a daily basis. Similarly, a national quantitative analysis by Ko and Jeong (2024), based on nearly a decade of Korean population survey data, found that mothers of children with ADHD reported higher levels of stress, depression, and psychological distress than

mothers of children without ADHD. Among fathers, the difference was less pronounced, supporting a gender-differentiated distribution of caregiving burden.

Studies conducted on large samples (Craig et al., 2016; Ko & Jeong, 2024) indicate that parents of children with ADHD not only show higher levels of stress and psychological difficulties compared with parents of typically developing children, but also higher levels of stress compared with parents in other clinical groups (Craig et al., 2016). Both studies also highlight a higher burden among mothers, suggesting a gender-differentiated distribution of caregiving demands, with mothers carrying a larger share of the daily management of the child's challenging behavior.

A study by Winfield et al. (2023), conducted among parents of children with ADHD during the COVID-19 pandemic, showed that parenting stress increases further during crisis periods. The authors demonstrated that pandemic-related measures disrupted family routines and led to an overall rise in stress and emotional exhaustion among parents. In the qualitative part of the study, parents described how the combination of home-schooling, reduced services, and worsening child behavior contributed to feelings of overload and burnout.

A mixed-methods study by Wu et al. (2025), focusing on the challenges faced by parents of adolescents with ADHD during the pandemic, found that the most significant predictor of parenting stress was not the pandemic itself but the baseline level of stress prior to the pandemic, suggesting the cumulative nature of parenting burden associated with caring for a child with ADHD.

1.2 Parental mental health (depression, anxiety, suicidal risk)

Elevated parental stress burden is associated with a higher prevalence of compromised parental mental health. Studies conducted in different cultural contexts consistently report increased rates of psychological difficulties such as depression and suicidal ideation (Al-Balushi et al., 2019; Ko & Jeong, 2024). Al-Balushi et al. (2019) report clinically significant depressive symptoms in up to 65% of caregivers and identify low socioeconomic status, the absence of another caregiver, and more severe child symptomatology as key predictors. Ko and Jeong (2024), in addition to the above outcomes, also emphasize higher levels of anxiety.

A quantitative study by Al-Balushi et al. (2019), conducted on 100 caregivers of children with ADHD in Oman, aimed to identify the prevalence of depressive symptoms and their predictors. The authors found that up to 65% of caregivers reported clinically significant depressive symptoms, with key predictors including low socioeconomic status, the absence of an additional caregiver in the household, and severe child symptomatology. The study thus shows that parental mental health is substantially shaped by psychosocial factors.

The analysis by Ko and Jeong (2024), using representative Korean population data, demonstrated that mothers of children with ADHD have a significantly higher risk of depression and suicidal ideation. This large-scale quantitative study also identified higher anxiety, further confirming the high psychological burden associated with long-term care for a child with challenging behavior.

Another important contribution is provided by Romaniuk et al. (2022). This quantitative study, focusing on the quality of life of families of children with ADHD and autism, was conducted among mothers and showed that even when overall family functioning is relatively stable, mothers' emotional well-being is significantly reduced. The authors emphasize that emotional

exhaustion may be present even when other aspects of family life appear to function well.

1.3 Well-being and quality of life of mothers and families

A significant perspective on the quality of life of mothers of children with ADHD is offered by Piscitello et al. (2022), conducted with mothers of adolescents. The study examined how ADHD affects maternal quality of life and found that mothers of adolescents with ADHD reported significantly lower quality of life than mothers of adolescents without ADHD. Among the strongest predictors of reduced quality of life were maternal depressive symptoms and the severity of the child's behavioral problems.

A complementary perspective on family quality of life is provided by Romaniuk et al. (2022), who compared families of children with autism and ADHD. Conducted among mothers, the study showed that while overall family quality of life may not differ dramatically, mothers' emotional well-being was systematically lower in families of children with ADHD. The authors interpret this as a consequence of chronic burden associated with high demands on supervision, structuring daily routines, and managing behavioral problems.

Zhang et al. (2022), examining a family-based physical activity program, found that increasing family physical activity improved not only the child's behavior but also parents' emotional well-being. This quantitative study underlines that parental quality of life can be enhanced through changes in everyday family functioning.

1.4 Modifiable factors and intervention effects

Parent-focused interventions appear to be a major modifiable component influencing parenting stress and parental well-being. A randomized controlled trial by Lo et al. (2020), conducted among families with children with ADHD, demonstrated that a family-based mindfulness intervention reduced parenting stress and improved parental well-being, while also improving the child's symptomatology.

A quantitative study by Neece (2014), examining mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) in parents of young children with developmental delays, reported significant reductions in parenting stress and depressive symptoms after program completion, along with positive secondary effects on child behavior.

An important finding is also offered by the telehealth study by Fossum et al. (2016). The study conducted among parents of children with behavioral disorders showed that parental psychological distress (e.g., depression or anxiety) did not moderate the effectiveness of online parent training. These findings are significant because they suggest that even highly burdened parents can benefit from interventions if they are flexible and accessible.

1.5 Interventions for parents of children with ADHD and other neurodevelopmental disorders

Interventions targeting parents constitute a key area of support for families of children with ADHD and other neurodevelopmental disorders. Research indicates that parenting competencies, parental mental health, and family functioning substantially influence treatment effectiveness and the degree of improvement in the child's symptoms. Therefore, a wide range of interventions has emerged—from art therapy, through family and narrative approaches, to structured programs supporting mothers and families.

Positive evidence is reported by studies evaluating these interventions. Lo et al. (2020) and Neece (2014) show that mindfulness-based interventions—either family-based or designed directly for parents—significantly reduce parenting stress and depressive symptoms and increase subjective well-

being. At the same time, improvements are observed in children's behavior, particularly in attention and ADHD symptoms. This supports the parent's role as a key actor in the therapeutic process: interventions focused on parental coping strategies have not only a direct effect on parental mental health but also an indirect effect on the child's symptoms.

However, intervention effectiveness does not appear to depend solely on parents' baseline mental health. Fossum et al. (2016) showed that higher levels of parental depressive, anxiety, or stress symptoms did not reduce the effectiveness of telehealth-based parent training. This is important because it suggests that even parents experiencing high psychological burden can benefit from programs if the intervention is structured, accessible, and well delivered.

1.6 Art therapy and its impact on parenting burden and well-being

Art therapy represents a specific intervention primarily targeting parents' emotional experiences and the reduction of stress associated with caring for a child with a neurodevelopmental disorder. Ouane et al. (2022) showed that group art therapy significantly improved mothers' psychological well-being, particularly in emotional regulation, stress management, and the quality of parenting experience. After a 12-week program, mothers reported lower psychological burden and better capacity to cope with challenging child behaviors, which the authors interpret as changes in self-reflection and parental coping strategies (Ouane et al., 2022).

A further key benefit of art therapy is a reduction in subjective feelings of isolation and the strengthening of shared experience among mothers of children with neurodevelopmental conditions. An interdisciplinary approach may also support linking art-therapeutic techniques with psychoeducation, contributing to more sustained improvements in mothers' quality of life.

1.7 Family-based interventions: approaches targeting the whole family

Family-oriented interventions assume that ADHD significantly affects the family system and that change solely at the level of the child is often insufficient. Lo et al. (2020) examined the effectiveness of a family-based mindfulness intervention targeting both parents and children with ADHD. The authors found that this intervention not only reduced the child's ADHD symptoms but also substantially decreased parenting stress and improved parental well-being (Lo et al., 2020). Parents also reported improved quality of family interactions and fewer conflicts.

Further research confirms that family-focused interventions improve communication patterns, strengthen parenting competencies, and reduce the negative emotional climate in the family. Goertz-Dorten et al. (2019) found that the THAV intervention, which includes components of social skills training, parent work, and behavior modification, improved children's prosocial behavior and significantly reduced parenting stress (Goertz-Dorten et al., 2019). The authors attribute this effect to increased parental self-efficacy and better understanding of child behavior.

Family interventions also demonstrate effectiveness across different age groups and types of neurodevelopmental conditions. Zhang et al. (2022) reported that increasing physical activity through a family-based program improved quality of life for both children with ADHD and their parents, with parents reporting better emotional functioning and lower stress (Zhang et al., 2022).

1.8 Narrative therapy and work with family identity

Narrative approaches emphasize how parents and children "tell the story" of their lives and of the impact of ADHD on the family. M. Lee et al. (2022) reported that multiple family

narrative therapy helps families transform negative and deficit-focused narratives about the child with ADHD into competence-oriented narratives that promote hope, a sense of control, and improved family functioning.

Parents reported that narrative techniques helped them better understand their own reactions, reduce self-blame, and shift from a pathologizing view of the child to a perspective emphasizing strengths, achievements, and family resilience resources (Lee et al., 2022). The authors also observed improvements in the emotional climate of the family and better communication between parents and children.

The contribution of narrative therapy appears particularly important in families experiencing long-term high stress and negative interaction patterns. Research suggests that changing the language and narrative about the child's behavior may lead to more enduring shifts in parenting attitudes than standard behavioral interventions.

1.9 Group programs for mothers of children with neurodevelopmental conditions

Group programs targeting mothers of children with ADHD or other neurodevelopmental difficulties appear highly effective in reducing parenting stress and improving psychological well-being. Romaniuk et al. (2022) reported that mothers of children with ADHD show markedly lower emotional well-being and high psychological burden, highlighting the need for targeted support programs. Such interventions are effective partly because they provide a shared space to identify problems, learn coping strategies, and receive support from parents with similar experiences.

Both art-therapy groups (Ouanes et al., 2022) and psychoeducational parent training (e.g., telehealth interventions in Fossum et al., 2016) led to improvements in depressive symptoms, reductions in stress, and higher perceived parenting competence. Group interventions also offer meaningful social anchoring, reducing feelings of isolation and exhaustion.

Additional studies confirm that mothers benefit from programs combining shared experience, emotional support, and practical strategies. For example, Lee et al. (2022) suggest that involving multiple families increases normalization of the experience and strengthens the ability to frame parenting difficulties as a shared phenomenon rather than individual failure.

1.10 Telehealth and online forms of parent intervention

A notable group of interventions includes programs delivered online. Fossum et al. (2016) found that parental psychological difficulties (e.g., anxiety, depression, or high stress) did not moderate the effectiveness of telehealth-delivered behavioral parent training. This finding is significant because it suggests that remote interventions can be effective even for highly burdened parents, who often represent a group with high need for support but limited ability to attend in-person services (Fossum et al., 2016).

Parents reported improvements in understanding children's behavior, reduced emotional reactivity, and greater self-confidence in setting boundaries. This research thus supports wider use of digital intervention formats for families of children with ADHD.

Parent-focused interventions are an important component of family support, and their effectiveness is well supported by research evidence. Art therapy improves emotional well-being and reduces stress; family-based interventions strengthen interactions and reduce the negative emotional climate; narrative therapy changes how families make sense of ADHD and their own functioning; and group programs reduce isolation and enhance social support. Telehealth findings indicate that even parents experiencing high psychological burden may benefit substantially from intervention programs. Together, these

approaches confirm that work with parents is an essential component of effective support for children with ADHD.

1.11 Contextual factors influencing parents of children with ADHD (pandemic, socioeconomic status, broader environment)

Contextual factors such as societal crises, family socioeconomic conditions, and the structural availability of support services significantly influence the psychological well-being of parents of children with neurodevelopmental disorders. The reviewed research suggests that these factors may increase parenting stress, worsen parental mental health, and affect parents' capacity to respond effectively to the needs of a child with ADHD.

1.12 The COVID-19 pandemic as a major stress-amplifying factor

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a unique stressor that substantially affected families of children with ADHD. A mixed qualitative-quantitative study by Winfield et al. (2023), conducted among parents of formally diagnosed children with ADHD, aimed to identify the pandemic's impact on family mental health. The authors found increased anxiety, poorer emotion regulation, disrupted routines, and increased problematic behavior among children with ADHD during the pandemic, with substantial deterioration also reported by parents. The study documented increases in depressive and anxiety symptoms, higher perceived stress, and overload associated with home-schooling, in which parents often acted as the primary facilitators of education (Winfield et al., 2023).

A further analysis by Wu et al. (2025), focusing on parents of adolescents with ADHD, showed that the most important predictor of parenting stress during the pandemic was not the pandemic circumstances per se, but the level of stress prior to the pandemic. This suggests that the long-term burden of caring for a child with ADHD makes parents more vulnerable to external crises. The study also demonstrated that parents entering the pandemic with limited social support or depleted coping resources experienced the greatest deterioration in mental health (Wu et al., 2025).

Both studies confirm that the pandemic acted as an "amplifier" of pre-existing burden, with key mechanisms including disrupted routines, isolation, increased demands related to supporting children during home learning and generalized uncertainty.

1.13 Socioeconomic factors and their role in parental mental health

Family socioeconomic conditions appear to be among the most important factors affecting the mental health of parents of children with ADHD. A quantitative study by Al-Balushi et al. (2019) in Oman found clinically significant depressive symptoms in up to 65% of caregivers. Key predictors included low household income and the absence of an additional caregiver in the household. The study also showed that higher psychological burden was associated with the hyperactive-impulsive and combined presentations of ADHD in the child (Al-Balushi et al., 2019). These findings support the hypothesis that socioeconomic deprivation amplifies the already demanding parenting role.

Ko and Jeong (2024), analyzing a large national dataset in Korea, similarly documented that mothers of children with ADHD more frequently report depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. While income status was not identified as an independent predictor, the authors emphasize that socioeconomically disadvantaged families showed higher burden particularly in access to care, school collaboration, and material security (Ko & Jeong, 2024). Socioeconomic status thus operates not only as a static factor, but also as a determinant of access to interventions, the capacity to cope with crises, and overall levels of parenting stress.

1.14 The broader family and community environment

The broader family dynamics and the availability of social ties significantly affect the psychological burden among parents of children with ADHD. Romaniuk et al. (2022) found that although overall family quality of life may be average, mothers' emotional well-being is substantially reduced, which the authors interpret as an outcome of long-term cumulative burden. The results also suggest that insufficient social support is one of the strongest predictors of low emotional well-being (Romaniuk et al., 2022).

Qualitative findings from Winfield et al. (2023) further indicate that parents often describe a lack of supportive infrastructure, limited access to mental health services, and low levels of school support during the pandemic. Such structural barriers contributed to increased feelings of isolation, helplessness, and chronic stress.

Zhang et al. (2022) also showed that positive changes in families are more likely where family functioning is strong, routines are present, and shared activities are maintained. The authors argue that these elements may act as important protective factors mitigating the impact of ADHD on parental psychological burden (Zhang et al., 2022).

2 Conclusion

Available studies clearly indicate that parents of children with ADHD constitute a high-risk group in terms of parenting stress, mental health, and quality of life, and that this burden is long-term and cumulative. Findings repeatedly show higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety among mothers, with important contributions from both child-related factors (symptom severity, comorbidity) and contextual factors (socioeconomic conditions and the availability of social support). At the same time, evidence suggests that targeted parent-focused interventions—mindfulness programs, art therapy, family-oriented and narrative approaches, group programs, and telehealth modalities—can significantly reduce parental psychological burden and improve family functioning, thereby indirectly contributing to reductions in child symptom severity. Contextual factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and socioeconomic deprivation do not operate in isolation but further amplify the existing burden in families of children with ADHD. These findings imply that care for a child with ADHD should systematically include support for parents and work with the family environment, both at the level of individual interventions and through broader systemic measures in education and health-social services.

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