

The untold stories of parenting as an Autistic father



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Introduction

- Research on Autistic parenting is growing, but Autistic fathers remain largely invisible.
- Existing work has primarily centred Autistic mothers, pregnancy, and early caregiving.
- Consequently, we know little about how Autistic fathers navigate everyday family life, relationships, and service systems.
- This limits both theoretical understanding and the development of inclusive, neuroaffirming supports for families.

Research question:

- What are the experiences of Autistic fathers in their parenting roles?

Method

- This qualitative study was led by an Autistic researcher and co-produced with four Autistic father advisors.
- Participants were 19 Autistic fathers living in Australia (ages 29–61; M = 46.8). The sample included biological, step, adoptive, trans, and non-binary fathers.
- Most participants (95%) had a formal autism diagnosis; 68% were parenting at least one Autistic child.
- Fathers had between one and four children (M = 1.8), totaling 34 children aged 2–26 years.
- Data were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted via video, phone, or written response according to participant preference.
 - » Spoken interviews: M = 48 minutes
 - » Written responses: M = 1,454 words
- Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (inductive, experiential).

Results

Themes	Description	Illustrative quotes
Theme 1: Finding joy and meaning in everyday moments	Autistic fathers described deep appreciation for ordinary moments of family life. Small, everyday experiences were often experienced as especially meaningful.	<i>"...I really love, love my life... treasure so much being an Autistic parent." - Luca</i>
Theme 2: Becoming myself through fatherhood	Fatherhood prompted reflection and greater understanding of their own identity. For some, this included recognising their autism through parenting their children.	<i>"I learnt I am Autistic through the process of parenting my children and their autism." - Blake</i>
Theme 3: Walking the tightrope of family life	Fathers continually balanced sensory, emotional, and practical demands of family life. This often required intentional strategies for regulation and recovery.	<i>"We all have our separate corners of the house that we use. Sometimes the noise/ mess/chaos bleeds into another's bubble and it becomes very stressful..." - Blake</i>
Theme 4: Parenting and relational work	Parenting involved ongoing communication, cooperation, and negotiation within family relationships. Fathers worked hard to be understood and to understand others.	<i>"[Learning I am Autistic has been] the main topic a of certainly my marriage and parenting in the last 12 months." - Connor</i>
Theme 5: Parenting in systems stacked against us	Fathers described navigating services and institutions that often overlooked or dismissed their needs as Autistic parents. This created additional emotional and advocacy labour.	<i>"I'm from a real place of privilege... if I was a young dad trying to navigate the system, f**k me, you know?" - Miles</i>

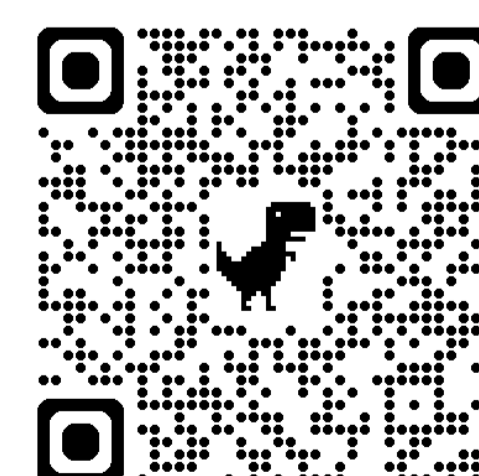
Conclusion

- This study provides new, co-produced insights into how Autistic fathers experience parenting in everyday life.
- Fathers described fatherhood as a source of joy, meaning, and authenticity, and for many, a catalyst for deeper understanding of their own Autistic identity.
- Parenting involved continual work to balance sensory, emotional, and practical demands.
- Fathers' experiences were shaped by relationships (with partners, children, and others) and by systems (schools, health, and services).
- Many fathers encountered systems that did not adequately recognise or accommodate Autistic ways of being.
- Together, these findings highlight that Autistic fatherhood is best understood within relational and systemic contexts, not only as an individual experience.
- Autistic fathers' perspectives are essential for a fuller understanding of Autistic family life.

Practical Implications

- Family, health, and education services should be autism-informed and inclusive of all parents and caregivers, including Autistic fathers.
- Professionals need greater understanding of Autistic communication styles, sensory needs, and ways of relating when working with families.
- Supports should be flexible and accessible (e.g., clear written information, multiple formats of engagement, quieter spaces where possible).
- Autistic fathers' caregiving roles should be specifically acknowledged within schools, services, and policy, alongside other parents and caregivers.
- Future research should intentionally include Autistic fathers, attend to diversity of families and contexts, and continue to prioritise co-produced approaches with Autistic people.

Pre-print of the article is available here:



Autistic Pregnancy and Parenthood Hub:

