

Beyond the Diagnosis: African American Fathers' Perspectives on Support Systems While Raising Children with Autism

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Abstract

African American fathers raising children with autism continue to be underrepresented in autism, family engagement, and special education research despite their important contributions to their children's educational and developmental outcomes. This qualitative study investigated ten African American fathers with children with autism. It examined their life experiences and the roles formal and informal support systems played in their parenting. Semi-structured interviews uncovered five interconnected developmental themes: (a) early bonding as the foundation of advocacy and protection, (b) trust and confidence in support systems, (c) spirituality and well-being, (d) coping strategies and personal growth, and (e) advancing culturally responsive care and community support. Collectively, the conclusions show how fathers drew on connectedness, trusted support networks, faith and spirituality, and personal experiences for resilience, advocacy, and purposeful engagement with educational, healthcare, and community systems. The study also emphasizes the value of viewing African American fathers as knowledgeable partners whose lived experiences contribute to experiential knowledge that supports improved family engagement and culturally responsive practice. Focusing on fathers' voices, this study adds to the academic literature about autism and fatherhood and offers practical implications for educators, educational leaders, healthcare professionals, community organizations, and policymakers seeking to develop more equitable, father-inclusive support systems that improve outcomes for children with autism and their families.

Keywords: African American fathers; autism; support systems; culturally responsive practice; family engagement; educational leadership

Introduction

Autism is one of the most prevalent developmental disabilities affecting children in the United States and continues to require coordinated educational, healthcare, and community responses. Although advances in screening and early identification have improved opportunities for intervention, disparities in diagnosis, access to services, and family support remain, particularly among historically underserved populations. These disparities have important implications not only for children's developmental outcomes but also for the families who advocate for and support them throughout their educational journey.

Research examining families of children with autism has expanded considerably over the past two decades. However, much of this scholarship has centered on mothers' experiences, leaving fathers comparatively underrepresented. Even fewer studies have explored the perspectives of African American fathers, despite evidence that they often navigate unique cultural, social, and systemic barriers while supporting their children. Consequently, the voices of African American fathers remain largely absent from the literature that informs educational practice, family support services, and community-based interventions.

Understanding fathers' experiences extends beyond documenting parenting challenges. Fathers frequently serve as advocates, decision-makers, emotional support, and partners in their children's educational and developmental progress. Their perspectives provide valuable insight into how formal support, informal relationships, faith communities, and culturally responsive services influence family resilience. Including these voices strengthens the knowledge base educators, healthcare professionals, and community organizations need to develop meaningful partnerships with families of children with autism.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of African American fathers raising children with autism and to understand how formal and informal support systems influenced those experiences. By centering fathers' perspectives, this study addresses a persistent gap in literature while offering practical implications for educational leaders, healthcare professionals, community organizations, and researchers committed to fostering culturally responsive, relationship-centered support for families of children with autism.

Literature Review

The fathers of African American children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) remain one of the least represented groups in autism research (Naderi Malek et al., 2026). This is despite increasing recognition of the influential role fathers play in child development, family functioning, and caregiver resilience (Trew, 2026). Despite a large body of literature describing the experiences of parents who support children with autism, the focus is mostly geared toward maternal perspectives, resulting in largely unexamined paternal experiences, especially those of African American fathers. This gap limits the availability of culturally responsive support and interventions needed to improve family outcomes and underscores the need for increased scholarship that recognizes the distinctive experiences, struggles, and support needs of this marginalized population.

Understanding the experiences of African American fathers has become increasingly relevant concerning ASD and the growing number of children and families impacted by it (Domaradzki, 2026). Early detection and intervention are closely linked to improved developmental outcomes

(Penner et al., 2026); yet studies have shown that persistent racial and ethnic differences in the timing of autism diagnoses and access to support services remain an issue (Shaw et al., 2025). African American and Hispanic children have a higher rate of delayed diagnosis than their White counterparts.

This results in missed opportunities and added pressure on families trying to navigate complicated healthcare and educational systems (Gallin et al., 2025). These inequities underscore the need to investigate not only access to services but also culturally responsive support that builds family resilience and fosters positive outcomes.

Families, Fathers, and Autism

Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in social communication, social interaction, and patterns of restricted or repetitive behaviors (Penner et al., 2026). While there are no definitive causes of autism, developments in screening, diagnostic practices, and public understanding are widely recognized as important contributors to the increase in autism recognized during the past two decades (Shaw et al., 2025). Growing awareness of the prevalence of ASD has led to recognition of its profound effects on families that go well beyond diagnostic milestones. This includes accessing educational systems, healthcare services, financial demands, as well as the emotional burden parents endure caring for their children with autism. These scenarios also highlight the need to consider not just how autism can manifest, but also what it's like to navigate the everyday realities of families who provide daily life support to children with ASD.

As autism research has increased, more attention has been given to those families who care for children on the autism spectrum (Penner et al., 2026). Parents often manage their family's day-to-day life while also navigating complex educational, healthcare, and support systems on behalf of their children (Feng et al., 2025). Research has consistently found that parenting a child with autism is linked with higher levels of stress, changes in family dynamics, and emotional, physical, and financial hardship (Feng et al., 2025). Despite these shared experiences, researchers increasingly recognize that parenting experiences vary across family members, highlighting the importance of examining individual parental perspectives in greater depth (Domaradzki, 2026).

Parents of children with autism often assume several roles that go far beyond typical parenting expectations (Feng et al., 2025). Along with providing daily care, they often also serve as advocates, service coordinators, educators, and decision-makers while navigating complex systems designed to support their children's developmental, educational, and healthcare needs (Feng et al., 2025). These responsibilities can greatly affect a parent's mental health, family relations, work, and financial circumstances (Bagale et al., 2025). Together, these responsibilities make the task of being a parent of a child with autism complicated and underscore the significance of understanding how families manage the demands long-term.

Although research examining parents of children with autism has grown considerably, fathers have historically been underrepresented within that body of literature (Naderi Malek et al., 2026). Much of what is known about parenting children with autism has stemmed from studies emphasizing maternal experiences, often positioning fathers as secondary participants or excluding their perspectives altogether (Naderi Malek et al., 2026). Consequently, the unique ways fathers experience caregiving, cope with stress, support their children, and contribute to

family functioning have received comparatively little scholarly attention (Domaradzki, 2026). As interest in paternal involvement has increased, researchers have begun to recognize that fathers' experiences offer important insights that both complement and differ from those reported by mothers, reinforcing the need for father-centered research (Domaradzki, 2026).

African American Fathers Within Their Cultural Context

Although interest in fathers of children with autism has grown, African American fathers' perspectives are still amongst the least represented voices in autism literature (Naderi Malek et al., 2026). Their experiences are rarely featured in research or combined with larger samples that obscure how race, culture, family structure, and community context shape fatherhood. Consequently, the specific strengths, struggles, coping mechanisms, and support resources of African American fathers have received relatively little attention. As a result, autism literature has inadequately captured their experiences. Bridging this gap is crucial not only for creating a fuller understanding of fatherhood within autism studies, but also for offering culturally responsive support and services to families.

The experiences of African American fathers cannot be fully understood without considering the broader cultural and social framework surrounding them (Naderi Malek et al., 2026). Parenting does not occur in isolation; family relationships, culture, community, socioeconomic status, and experiences within the educational and health systems shape it. These situational factors shape how fathers interpret their role as parents, seek help, advocate for their children, and work with providers (Domaradzki, 2026). For some African American fathers, perceptions of cultural understanding, representation in schools, and trust in educational and healthcare systems may affect their willingness to seek and participate fully in available supports (Davis et al., 2025). Identifying and understanding this context is imperative to shaping culturally responsive research, practice, and policies. This includes pathways proposed to better understand and serve African American families and to increase scholarly understanding through historically uncaptured perspectives.

Social Support for African American Fathers.

Social support is a necessary component in enhancing the well-being and resiliency of families of children with autism in the community. The evidence from research consistently supports the evidence base that formal supports, including health care professionals, clinicians, educators, therapists, community organizations, and others, and informal supports (e.g., spouse, extended family members, friends, faith communities, peers) have positive effects on families' functioning and parents' well-being (Bagale et al., 2025; Penner et al., 2026). However, support networks alone are not enough to offset the impact of non-supportive relationships, and researchers are also recognizing that relationship quality may influence how families seek, engage with, approach, and accept available supports (Davis et al., 2025). For some families, meaningful support extends beyond services to include reducing isolation and strengthening caregiving relationships, which support resilience (Bagale et al., 2025). This body of literature shows that understanding how parents experience support is essential for planning and executing responsive research, practice, and community-based interventions with the hope of strengthening families raising children with autism.

Even with expanding literature addressing autism, parenting, and social support, important gaps still lie ahead when considering the lived experiences of African American fathers raising

children with autism (Naderi Malek et al., 2026; Davis et al., 2025). Prior research has historically focused on the mother/the mother's point of view and/or a combined parental experience, resulting in insufficient insights of specific father perspectives and beliefs that shape how fathers interpret, respond, and utilize support (Naderi Malek et al., 2026). Additionally, studies in which African American fathers were included typically centered barriers, stressors, or service disparities and paid comparatively little attention to how these fathers understand what meaningful support means in the context of their families, communities, cultural identities, and experiences. Dealing with this gap is necessary to develop a more inclusive understanding of paternal experiences. It also lays the groundwork for culturally responsive research, practice, and community partnerships that support families of children with autism. This study aimed to amplify African American fathers' voices.

Although existing literature has increased understanding of autism and family experiences, African American fathers remain substantially underrepresented. Limited research on their perspectives, particularly regarding formal and informal support systems, underscores the need for further inquiry. The present study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of African American fathers raising children with autism and examining how support systems influenced those experiences.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a generic qualitative research design to explore the experiences of African American fathers raising children with autism and to understand the role of formal and informal support systems in their lives. Generic qualitative research is appropriate for examining individuals' experiences and perspectives without being guided by the explicit philosophical assumptions associated with other qualitative traditions (Kahlke, 2014; Percy et al., 2015). This design was well suited to the purpose of the study, which sought to understand fathers' perceptions of parenting children with autism through their own voices and experiences.

Participants and Recruitment

The researcher used purposive sampling to recruit information-rich participants who could provide first-hand perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation. This approach aligned with the flexible, exploratory nature of generic qualitative research (Kahlke, 2014). Participants were African American fathers residing in the southeastern United States who were raising a child diagnosed with autism. The researcher recruited participants through autism advocacy organizations, online support groups, community organizations, churches, and social media. Snowball sampling supplemented recruitment when eligible participants referred to other fathers who met the study criteria.

Ten African American fathers participated in the study. Data saturation was achieved after eight interviews, with two additional interviews conducted to confirm that no new themes emerged.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to encourage participants to describe their parenting experiences, perceived challenges, successes, and the influence of formal

and informal support systems. Interviews were conducted in person and through virtual platforms, including telephone, FaceTime, and Skype, depending on participant preference and availability. Interviews averaged approximately 75 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent.

The researcher maintained field notes throughout the interview process to document observations, emerging insights, and contextual information. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and each participant was provided with a copy of the transcript to verify the accuracy of his responses through member checking. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, as described by Percy et al. (2015). Each transcript was reviewed multiple times to become familiar with the data before identifying and coding meaningful words, phrases, and participant statements. Codes representing similar concepts were grouped into broader categories and refined into themes that reflected shared patterns across participant experiences.

NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to organize interview transcripts, code, and develop themes. Throughout the analytical process, themes were continually reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented participants' experiences and addressed the research questions.

Findings

Thematic analysis identified five progressive developmental themes that collectively describe the experiences of African American fathers raising children with autism. Rather than isolated findings, the themes reflect an interconnected developmental process in which fathers described building relationships, developing trust, drawing on faith and resilience, and ultimately advocating for culturally responsive support systems. The sections that follow present each theme individually while recognizing their collective contribution to understanding fathers' experiences.

Theme 1: Relationships as the Foundation of Fatherhood

The analysis revealed that early bonding and relationship development formed the foundation on which African American fathers built their parenting experiences. Although participants described communication barriers, behavioral challenges, and uncertainty associated with raising children with autism, these obstacles did not weaken the emotional connections they shared with their children. Instead, fathers consistently describe relationships characterized by patience, adaptation, and an unwavering commitment to understanding and supporting their children's individual needs. These relationships evolved beyond traditional notions of fatherhood, positioning participants as advocates, protectors, and consistent sources of stability within their families.

Participants acknowledged that developing and maintaining these relationships required intentional effort. Fathers described adapting family routines, sharing caregiving responsibilities, and balancing the needs of children with autism alongside those of siblings. One father, who was

raising two children with autism while also parenting an older daughter, explained the continual adjustments required to meet everyone's needs:

"It's hard. Most time we have to split up into groups of two: one parent to one child... We also have a 14-year-old daughter who is very active. But we still must make time for her too. It gets hard and just like we get tired, the help gets tired too."

Rather than viewing these adjustments as burdens, participants described them as necessary expressions of parental commitment that strengthened family relationships over time.

Communication emerged as one of the most significant challenges influencing father-child relationships. Several fathers described raising children who were nonverbal or experienced delayed expressive language, requiring them to develop new approaches to understanding their children's needs. One participant explained that his son often communicated frustration through behavioral outbursts rather than spoken language:

"Communication fluctuates because sometimes he tries to communicate with me, and I have difficulty understanding him... we now give the five-minute warning... he responds better when this rule is practiced."

Another father described the patience required to understand his son's developing speech, explaining that conversations often required repeated questions, careful listening, and gentle redirection before meaningful communication could occur. Rather than expressing discouragement, fathers consistently described adapting their own communication styles to better support their children, demonstrating flexibility and persistence as essential components of their relationships.

Despite these communication challenges, participants repeatedly emphasized the rewards associated with witnessing their children's developmental progress. Fathers described celebrating milestones that might otherwise be overlooked, including improved speech, successful participation in school, greater independence, and small but meaningful moments of growth. One participant reflected on his son's remarkable progress following therapeutic interventions:

"Most rewarding is to see his progress from when we first got the diagnosis... Seeing him blossom in speech, math, and other classes is rewarding."

Similarly, another father described the joy of hearing new words and observing developmental gains that confirmed the effectiveness of ongoing therapeutic support:

"Most rewarding is being able to personally see the development of your child... Being able to hear new words or recognize something new... that's life-changing."

These narratives illustrate that fathers measured success not by comparisons with typically developing children, but by celebrating each child's individual growth and achievements.

As relationships deepened, fathers increasingly described themselves as protectors and advocates for their children. Their concerns extended beyond autism-related challenges to include societal misunderstanding, stigma, and the unique vulnerabilities associated with raising African American children with disabilities. One father described himself and his wife as their son's "security blanket," explaining that their role extended beyond caregiving to providing emotional

safety and reassurance. Other participants expressed concern about how their children would be treated in schools, community settings, and broader society. One father captured this protective instinct by explaining:

"Having an African American son, we understand the world and his being so genuine is scary. I let him go out with the other kids, but it's always hard because you're always in the corner watching to make sure that no one uses it against him."

These accounts demonstrate that fatherhood extended well beyond meeting daily caregiving responsibilities. Participants described a profound sense of responsibility to prepare, protect, and advocate for their children while navigating the intersecting realities of autism and race.

Collectively, these findings suggest that early bonding represented far more than emotional attachment. For the fathers in this study, strong parent-child relationships became the foundation for advocacy, protection, patience, and resilience. Communication challenges, behavioral differences, and societal perceptions presented ongoing obstacles; however, participants consistently framed these experiences through the strength of their relationships rather than through limitation or loss. Early bonding provided the relational foundation that enabled fathers to navigate the complexities of raising children with autism while remaining steadfast in their commitment to their children's growth, well-being, and future success.

Theme 2: Trust and Confidence in Support Systems

Following the deep bonds fathers described with their children, participants consistently emphasized that navigating autism required more than personal commitment. Their experiences revealed that trust shaped whether support systems became meaningful resources or missed opportunities. Fathers who developed confidence in schools, therapists, and early intervention programs described those relationships as instrumental in their children's progress. Others, however, encountered barriers related to awareness, accessibility, or confidence in available services. Collectively, their narratives suggest that support effectiveness depended not simply on availability, but on whether it was trusted, understood, and experienced as responsive to their family's needs.

Formal Supports as Trusted Partners

Several fathers described formal support systems as critical partners in their parenting journey. Schools, daycare providers, therapists, and county programs were frequently identified as sources of guidance that strengthened both their children's development and the fathers' own confidence in navigating autism.

One father reflected on the importance of school-based support while recognizing that academic success alone would not prepare his son for adulthood:

"We think that he is doing well academically but not as well socially. The school is working with him on social interactions. On the other hand, we want him to struggle and be uncomfortable sometimes because, in the long run, it will help him to adapt. Because we cannot be with him 24/7. His ability to cope is what will get him through life."

Another father attributed his daughter's progress to early identification and continued opportunities for interaction with peers.

"From a formal perspective, I credit it to being able to identify it before age two... Teachers have played a major role."

For another participant, coordinated professional services created a support network that extended beyond a single provider.

"The early help that we got from the county... was very helpful... We later got help from another therapist, speech therapist, occupational therapy, and ABA."

Across these accounts, fathers consistently associate early intervention with improved developmental outcomes and greater confidence in supporting their children. Rather than viewing professional services as replacing their role, they described them as trusted partners that strengthened their ability to advocate effectively.

When Support Exists but Remains Out of Reach

Although many fathers benefited from formal services, others revealed that awareness—not willingness—often limited access to support. Several participants explained that they were unaware of autism-specific resources or father-focused support groups, despite expressing interest in participating.

One participant acknowledged:

"I was not really aware of social support groups and did not know that they existed."

Another father explained:

"As far as programs specifically for autism, I don't know of any... We are just to the point that we are starting to reach out."

Perhaps the most revealing observation came from a father who connected resource awareness with broader disparities affecting Black families.

"Some people don't have this type of support, but we do and it's out there, but some people don't know that it's there, especially Black people."

These narratives suggest that availability alone does not ensure meaningful access. Fathers demonstrated a willingness to seek assistance, yet many lacked knowledge of existing resources or pathways to obtain them. This finding underscores the importance of culturally responsive outreach that actively connects families with available services rather than assuming information will naturally reach those who need it.

Trust Determines Engagement

Participants also showed that trust influenced whether they embraced, modified, or abandoned available support. Positive experiences encouraged continued engagement, while negative encounters often redirected fathers toward informal networks of family and trusted relationships.

One participant described discontinuing a formal support group after an unsatisfactory experience but emphasized the value of his wife's professional expertise and community-based programs.

"Formal social supports have not been helpful... What did work for me was the natural support that my wife gets from being in special education... YMCA and Easter Seals... have been helpful for our child."

Other fathers expressed enthusiasm for participating in support groups designed specifically for men, suggesting that existing services did not always reflect their needs or lived experiences.

Collectively, these accounts illustrate that fathers evaluated support systems through the lens of trust, relevance, and relationship. Services became meaningful when they respected fathers' experiences, addressed practical concerns, and built confidence in those receiving assistance.

Synthesis

The fathers' experiences reveal that meaningful support extends beyond the existence of programs and services. Effective support systems are built upon trust, early engagement, cultural responsiveness, and relationships that affirm fathers as active partners in their children's development. When these elements were present, fathers described greater confidence in navigating autism and advocating for their children. When they were absent, families often relied on informal networks or continued searching for resources that reflected their needs. These findings lead to the next theme, which explores the internal sources of strength many fathers drew upon, including spirituality and personal resilience, when external support alone were insufficient.

Theme 3: Spirituality and Well-Being

Participants' experiences suggest that spirituality contributed to both emotional and psychological well-being. Prayer, worship, and participation in faith communities created opportunities for encouragement, reflection, and renewed strength during periods of stress. These findings are consistent with prior research describing spirituality as a coping resource that can reduce parental stress and positively influence mental and physical well-being.

Importantly, fathers did not portray spirituality as replacing professional services or community support. Instead, faith complemented those resources by addressing needs that extended beyond practical assistance. While therapists, schools, and intervention programs supported children's developmental progress, spirituality often strengthened fathers' ability to remain hopeful, emotionally present, and engaged throughout the parenting journey.

Synthesis

The fathers' narratives reveal that spirituality functioned as far more than religious practice. It became a source of resilience, meaning, and hope that shaped how participants interpreted both fatherhood and autism. Through prayer, church communities, and deeply held beliefs, fathers described an enduring foundation that sustained them during uncertainty while reinforcing their commitment to their children's growth and well-being. Together, these findings demonstrate that meaningful support includes not only external resources but also the internal beliefs that enable parents to persevere. This understanding naturally leads to the next theme, which explores the practical coping strategies fathers developed as they navigated the ongoing demands of raising a child with autism.

Theme 4: Coping Strategies and Personal Growth

As fathers described the emotional demands of raising a child with autism, they also revealed the strategies that enabled them to navigate those challenges while maintaining their own well-being. Participants acknowledged experiencing stress, grief, and emotional exhaustion; however, their narratives extended beyond survival. Fathers described intentionally creating opportunities for self-care, relying on support networks, strengthening their relationships, and gradually developing new perspectives that transformed how they viewed themselves, their families, and fatherhood. Collectively, these experiences suggest that coping involves not only managing difficult circumstances but also adapting in ways that fostered resilience and personal growth.

Caring for Themselves While Caring for Others

Participants recognized that caring for a child with autism often required extraordinary emotional and physical commitment. Several fathers acknowledged the importance of intentionally caring for themselves and supporting their spouses' well-being to sustain their families over time.

One father described how he and his wife intentionally created space for individual restoration.

"My wife, she values the isolation, so what I'll do is allow her time to go to her room and do whatever brings her joy."

This reflection illustrates that self-care extends beyond individual needs. Fathers demonstrated an awareness that supporting one another emotionally strengthened the family. Rather than viewing personal time as selfish, participants described it as an important investment in their ability to continue caring for their children.

Other fathers identified support groups as valuable opportunities to connect with parents who understood their experiences. Sharing challenges with others facing similar circumstances reduced feelings of isolation while providing encouragement, practical advice, and emotional reassurance.

Navigating Emotional Challenges Together

Participants also discussed the emotional impact autism had on their families, particularly following diagnosis. One father described witnessing his wife's profound grief and reflected that future research should examine how spouses cope when processing the emotional realities associated with raising a child with autism.

This observation broadens the discussion of coping beyond the individual father. Participants recognized that autism affects the entire family system and that emotional well-being often depends upon how family members support one another through different stages of adjustment. Fathers frequently balanced caring for their children while simultaneously providing encouragement and stability for their spouses and families.

These experiences highlight the relational nature of coping. Rather than confronting challenges independently, fathers describe resilience as something cultivated through shared understanding, mutual support, and ongoing communication.

Becoming Better Through the Journey

Perhaps the most compelling finding within this theme was not how fathers endured adversity, but how many described being changed by it.

One participant reflected:

"Honestly, it's hard to explain, but he has really made me a better person. When you see how loving, genuine, and carefree he is... he has taught me how to laugh, how to relax, and bring out the emotional side that we as African Americans may have otherwise hidden."

Rather than describing autism solely as a source of hardship, this father revealed how parenting reshaped his understanding of vulnerability, emotional expression, and personal growth. His reflection suggests that raising a child with autism challenges traditional expectations surrounding masculinity while creating space for greater openness, compassion, and emotional authenticity.

This perspective extends beyond coping. It illustrates transformation.

Participants did not merely describe learning strategies to manage stress; many described becoming different fathers—and different people—because of their experiences.

Synthesis

The fathers' narratives reveal that coping involves far more than managing daily responsibilities. Participants intentionally pursued practices that promoted emotional well-being, strengthened family relationships, and sustained their ability to care for their children. At the same time, many fathers described experiencing profound personal growth that reshaped their perspectives on fatherhood, relationships, and themselves. These findings suggest that resilience is not simply the ability to endure adversity but the capacity to emerge from adversity with greater empathy, emotional awareness, and purpose. This progression naturally leads to the final theme, which explores fathers' recommendations for strengthening culturally responsive community resources and support systems for future families.

Theme 5: Advancing Culturally Responsive Care and Community Support

As fathers reflected on their experiences raising children with autism, many shifted their focus beyond their own families to consider how future families might be better supported. Participants identified the importance of culturally responsive care, early access to services, knowledgeable professionals, and community awareness. Their narratives suggest that improving outcomes for African American children with autism requires more than expanding available resources; it requires support systems that recognize the unique cultural experiences, strengths, and challenges of the families they serve.

Recognizing the Intersection of Race and Autism

Several fathers described preparing their children not only to navigate autism but also to navigate the realities associated with being African American. Participants recognized that their children would encounter challenges extending beyond developmental differences and believed these intersecting experiences required intentional preparation and support.

One father explained:

"My goal is to get him prepared for the stigma that is placed on autism and life in general. Especially being an African American, there is such a hardship in society today that makes it difficult for autism. Perception is disheartening."

This reflection illustrates that fathers viewed autism within a broader social context shaped by race, public perception, and societal expectations. Their experiences suggest that culturally responsive care requires acknowledging these intersecting realities rather than addressing autism in isolation.

Participants also recognized that cultural perceptions sometimes delayed families from seeking evaluation or support.

One father simply stated:

"Denial... we hide from the truth."

Although brief, this statement highlights how stigma and cultural beliefs may influence early identification and intervention.

The Importance of Culturally Responsive Partnerships

Participants consistently emphasized the value of professionals who demonstrated understanding, respect, and genuine partnership with families. Fathers described positive experiences with teachers, therapists, social workers, and early intervention providers who recognized their children's individual needs and treated parents as active participants in decision-making.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that not all families experienced meaningful support equally.

One father reflected:

"It was explained that the sooner we get help the better life will be for our autistic child... We later got help from other therapists, speech therapist, occupational therapy and ABA. Some people don't have this type of support, but we do and it's out there, but some people don't know that it's there, especially Black people."

His observation goes beyond service availability. It highlights the importance of awareness, culturally responsive communication, and proactive outreach that connects families with existing resources before opportunities for early intervention are lost.

Listening to Families as Partners

Collectively, the fathers' experiences suggest that culturally responsive care begins by listening.

Participants did not ask professionals to possess every answer. Instead, they described the importance of educators, healthcare providers, counselors, and community organizations taking time to understand each family's unique experiences, cultural values, and aspirations for their children.

Their narratives indicate that effective partnerships are built upon mutual respect, shared decision-making, and recognition that parents possess essential knowledge about their own children. When professionals approached families with openness and cultural humility, fathers described greater confidence in services and stronger collaboration throughout their parenting journey.

Synthesis

The fathers' recommendations extend beyond improving autism services. They call for systems of care that recognize the whole family, honor cultural identity, promote early access to support, and cultivate meaningful partnerships between professionals and parents. Collectively, these findings suggest that culturally responsive care is not simply a professional competency but an ongoing commitment to listening, understanding, and serving families with empathy and respect. By centering the voices of African American fathers, this study contributes to a growing understanding of how culturally responsive practices can strengthen support systems and improve outcomes for children with autism and their families.

Results and Discussion

Although five themes emerged from the data analysis, they are best understood as interconnected dimensions of the fathers' experiences rather than independent findings. Accordingly, the following discussion synthesizes these themes into four broader interpretive areas.

The four interpretive areas: relationships, trust, faith and spirituality, and resilience, reflect the central processes that connected the fathers' experiences across the five themes. The fifth theme, advancing culturally responsive care and community support, represents the culmination of those experiences and appears across the four interpretive areas rather than as a separate discussion. Following the discussion, the Developmental Synthesis returns to the five original themes to illustrate their progression from fathers' early relationships with their children to their recommendations for strengthening support for future families.

This study explored the lived experiences of African American fathers raising children with autism and examined the role of formal and informal social supports in their parenting journeys. A generic qualitative analysis of participants' narratives revealed five related themes. Collectively, the themes reveal a developmental progression from building meaningful relationships with their children, to establishing trust in support systems, drawing strength from spirituality, developing resilience through lived experience, and ultimately offering recommendations to strengthen support for future families.

Participants characterized fatherhood by purposeful involvement, adaptability, advocacy, and a continued dedication to their child's well-being, illustrating experiences that extend beyond traditional descriptions of parenting struggles. Although much of the literature emphasizes the stressors associated with raising a child with autism (Feng et al., 2025), this study found that fathers framed their journeys as narratives of perseverance, personal growth, and hope. Their stories demonstrate that parenting a child with autism is not only marked by adversity but also by opportunities for strengthened relationships, emotional growth, and purposeful advocacy.

Perhaps most significantly, these findings reposition African American fathers from a population historically underrepresented in autism research to one whose lived experiences provide valuable insights for educational practice, family involvement, and community support. Their reflections extend beyond personal narratives to offer practical lessons in trust, communication, cultural responsiveness, and collaborative partnerships that can inform educators, healthcare providers, community organizations, and policymakers. As such, this study contributes to the growing literature recognizing lived experience as a valuable source of knowledge to inform practice and improve outcomes for children with autism and their families.

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

Relationships as the Foundation of Fatherhood

A major contribution of this study is that African American fathers consistently described relationships with their children as the foundation of their parenting experience. Instead of defining fatherhood primarily through the challenges associated with autism, participants focused on emotional connection, active involvement, advocacy, and an unwavering commitment to their children's development. These findings align with prior research indicating that fathers play a significant role in their children's social, emotional, and developmental functioning (Domaradzki, 2026). These findings contribute to growing literature by demonstrating how African American fathers purposefully cultivate meaningful relationships despite challenges of raising children with autism.

The autism literature has largely emphasized parental stress, caregiver burden, and maternal experiences (Naderi Malek et al., 2026), advancing understanding of family adaptation while often overlooking fathers. These findings suggest that an exclusive focus on stress may obscure the relational strengths fathers develop while raising children with autism. Rather than viewing autism solely as a challenge, participants described journeys marked by patience, learning, emotional growth, and a deeper appreciation of their roles as fathers. Consistent with research identifying father engagement as central to child development (Domaradzki, 2026), participants described their involvement as extending beyond financial and disciplinary responsibilities to include educational advocacy, therapeutic engagement, emotional support, and intentional efforts to foster their children's confidence and independence. These insights challenge deficit-oriented narratives of African American fatherhood by highlighting fathers as active partners in their children's developmental journeys and reinforcing the importance of recognizing fathers as relational partners in educational, healthcare, and community settings.

Trust in Support Systems

Trust emerged as a defining element in the fathers' experiences with formal and informal support systems. Participants consistently described trust as developing through authentic relationships, consistent communication, and demonstrations of respect rather than through professional titles or organizational roles alone. Fathers were more likely to engage with educational, healthcare, and community-based services when they perceived professionals as genuinely listening to their concerns, acknowledging their perspectives, and treating them as respected partners in decision-making.

These findings align with previous literature emphasizing the importance of family-centered practice and collaborative partnerships in supporting children with autism (Davis et al., 2025; Hannon et al., 2018). Although prior research shows that meaningful collaboration improves educational planning, service coordination, and child outcomes, this study extends the literature by showing that trust is not established through service availability alone. Rather, trust develops through repeated interactions characterized by transparency, consistency, cultural responsiveness, and mutual respect.

Participants also emphasized the importance of feeling noticed, heard, and respected when working with professionals. Several fathers recounted instances when professionals overlooked or dismissed their knowledge of their children, creating barriers to meaningful partnerships. In contrast, when educators, healthcare providers, and service professionals actively sought their perspectives and recognized their lived experiences, fathers felt empowered to engage as

collaborative partners. These findings demonstrate that trust is both relational and reciprocal, requiring professionals to recognize fathers not only as caregivers but also as knowledgeable contributors to their children's development. Accordingly, educational leaders, practitioners, and community organizations seeking to strengthen family engagement should recognize that effective partnerships are built not merely by providing services but by fostering relationships that honor fathers' voices, experiences, and expertise. By creating respectful, inclusive environments, professionals can build stronger family-professional partnerships that ultimately benefit children with autism and their families.

Faith and Spirituality as Sources of Strength

Faith and spirituality emerged as enduring sources of strength that enabled participants to navigate the emotional, relational, and practical demands of raising children with autism. Rather than serving only as a response to crises, faith provided ongoing encouragement, perspective, and perseverance, shaping how fathers interpreted challenges, maintained hope, and continued advocating for their children despite uncertainty.

These findings align with previous research identifying spirituality as an important coping resource for families raising children with disabilities (Pearson et al., 2022). Prior studies have shown that faith communities, personal religious practices, and spiritual beliefs provide emotional support, foster resilience, and promote psychological well-being. This study extends that literature by demonstrating that spirituality also shaped how African American fathers understood their roles, responsibilities, and purpose as parents. Faith was not simply something participants possessed; it influenced how they approached fatherhood each day.

Participants consistently described drawing strength from prayer, trusting God's guidance, and seeking encouragement from their faith communities during times of struggle. Their experiences suggest that spirituality functioned as more than an individual coping strategy; it fostered connection, belonging, and hope through relationships that provided both emotional affirmation and practical support. For many fathers, faith communities reinforced that they were not navigating their parenting journeys alone. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing spirituality as a component of culturally responsive family engagement. Educational leaders, healthcare professionals, and community organizations should acknowledge the diverse ways families rely on faith and spirituality for strength. Respectfully recognizing these dynamics can foster more holistic partnerships that honor families' values while supporting parents' and children's emotional well-being.

Resilience Through Lived Experience

Resilience emerged not as an innate character trait but as a capacity developed through the lived experiences of raising children with autism. Participants described resilience as a dynamic process shaped by perseverance, adaptation, faith, advocacy, and continued engagement with their children despite ongoing challenges. Rather than reflecting the absence of hardship, resilience developed through confronting adversity, learning from experience, and remaining committed to their children's growth and well-being.

These findings align with prior research describing resilience as a dynamic process rather than a fixed trait among families of children with disabilities (Feng et al., 2025). Previous studies have identified adaptive coping, social support, and family strengths as important contributors to

resilience. This study extends that literature by demonstrating how resilience emerged through fathers' daily experiences, evolving perspectives, and unwavering commitment to their parenting roles. Their resilience was reflected not in avoiding obstacles but in continually adapting to them.

Participants also described how these experiences transformed their understanding of fatherhood. Challenges that initially appeared overwhelming became opportunities for personal growth, deeper relationships, and greater confidence in advocating for their children. As fathers gained knowledge, navigated educational and healthcare systems, and developed supportive networks, they became increasingly confident in meeting their children's evolving needs. These experiences demonstrate that resilience was forged through lived experience, reflection, and sustained engagement rather than isolated moments of success. Together, these findings emphasize resilience as a developmental process strengthened through supportive relationships, culturally responsive practices, and meaningful family involvement. Educational leaders, healthcare professionals, and community organizations can foster resilience by recognizing fathers as valued partners and creating environments that support their sustained involvement, ultimately benefiting both children with autism and their families.

Developmental Synthesis

While each theme offers a distinct perspective on the experiences of African American fathers raising children with autism, the findings are best understood as interconnected rather than independent. Collectively, the five themes illustrate a developmental progression through which fathers' lived experiences evolved over time. Table 1 synthesizes this progression and highlights each theme's significance for educational practice, healthcare partnerships, community engagement, and future research.

Table 1. *Progressive Developmental Themes Identified in Fathers' Experiences*

Developmental Theme	Why It Matters
Early Bonding as the Foundation of Advocacy and Protection	Illustrates that early father-child relationships established the foundation for protection, trust, and long-term engagement throughout the parenting journey.
Trust and Confidence in Support Systems	Highlights the value of authentic, collaborative relationships with professionals, educators, healthcare providers, and community organizations.
Spirituality and Well-Being	Demonstrates how faith and spirituality provided hope, emotional strength, and meaning while navigating the challenges of raising a child with autism.
Coping Strategies and Personal Growth	Reveals how fathers developed resilience, adapted to adversity, and experienced personal growth through lived experience.
Advancing Culturally Responsive Care and Community Support	Emphasizes how fathers' experiences can inform more culturally responsive practices,

stronger community partnerships, and improved support for future families.

Recommendations

The findings from this study extend beyond documenting the experiences of African American fathers raising children with autism. They provide practical guidance for educators, educational leaders, healthcare professionals, community organizations, and researchers seeking to strengthen culturally responsive, relationship-centered support systems. These recommendations are grounded in fathers' experiences and are intended to inform practice, policy, and future research.

Recommendations for Educators

Educators are often among the first professionals to establish ongoing relationships with families following a child's autism diagnosis. The findings suggest that fathers desire meaningful engagement that recognizes them as active participants in their children's educational journey rather than secondary caregivers. Schools should intentionally include fathers in educational planning, parent-teacher conferences, Individualized Education Program meetings, and ongoing communication regarding student progress. Professional learning that strengthens educators' cultural responsiveness and understanding of diverse family structures may further enhance collaborative relationships with African American fathers.

Recommendations for Educational Leaders

School and district leaders play a critical role in establishing organizational cultures that encourage authentic family engagement. Educational leaders should promote policies and professional development that recognize fathers as valued educational partners and encourage inclusive communication practices throughout schools. Leadership initiatives that foster collaboration among educators, families, and community organizations may improve trust while creating more equitable opportunities for family participation in educational decision-making.

Recommendations for Healthcare and Family-Support Professionals

Healthcare providers, therapists, and family-support professionals should recognize fathers as essential participants throughout the diagnostic, intervention, and support process. Participants emphasized the importance of clear communication, culturally responsive care, and relationships built upon trust and mutual respect. Professionals should actively engage fathers during assessments, treatment planning, and follow-up services while providing information that acknowledges their unique experiences, concerns, and strengths.

Recommendations for Community and Faith-Based Organizations

Community organizations and faith communities remain important sources of emotional, social, and practical support for many African American fathers. Participants described the value of trusted relationships that extended beyond formal service systems. Organizations serving families affected by autism should consider developing father-focused support groups, mentoring opportunities, educational workshops, and collaborative partnerships with schools and healthcare providers. Strengthening these community-based networks may improve access to resources while reducing feelings of isolation among fathers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research is needed to further understand the experiences of African American fathers across diverse geographic regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and family structures. Longitudinal studies examining how fathers' support needs evolve over time may provide important insights into family resilience and child outcomes. Future investigations should also explore the effectiveness of culturally responsive educational, healthcare, and community interventions designed specifically to strengthen father engagement and support.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of literature recognizing the importance of fathers' experiences while raising children with autism. By centering the voices of African American fathers, this study addresses a longstanding gap in autism research and highlights the significance of culturally responsive, relationship-centered support systems. Participants described fatherhood as a journey shaped by enduring relationships, trust, resilience, faith, and the ongoing pursuit of meaningful support. Their experiences demonstrate that fathers are not peripheral participants in their children's lives but essential caregivers, advocates, and partners whose perspectives deserve greater recognition across educational, healthcare, and community settings.

The study further underscores the importance of intentional collaboration among educators, healthcare professionals, family-support providers, community organizations, and faith communities. When fathers are acknowledged as valued partners and given culturally responsive opportunities to engage, they are better positioned to support their children's educational, developmental, and social outcomes. Strengthening these collaborative relationships can improve not only family experiences but also the quality and accessibility of services for children with autism and their families.

Ultimately, this research affirms that listening to African American fathers is more than an academic exercise—it is an opportunity to strengthen support systems through greater understanding, inclusion, and partnership. As educational and community systems continue to evolve, ensuring that fathers' voices inform policy, practice, and future research will contribute to more equitable, responsive, and effective support for children with autism and the families who care for them.

When fathers are seen, heard, and supported, children and families thrive. This simple truth reflects the collective voices of the fathers who participated in this study and serves as both the central message of this research and a call to action for educators, healthcare professionals, community organizations, faith communities, and researchers committed to building stronger, more inclusive support systems.

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