

## Fathers' online communication about parenting a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

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### Introduction

Most research focuses on mothers while investigation into father's experiences of parenting a child with ADHD has been limited due to difficulties engaging fathers via traditional research methods (Phares et al., 2005). The advancement of modern communication technologies such as online forums provide an alternative approach for researchers to capture the subjective and authentic experiences of fathers.

Based on this rationale, the present study examined messages/posts written by fathers on an online forum to explore how fathers discuss their experience about parenting a child with ADHD. Our specific aim was to identify the common areas that fathers talk about on online forums. Such information can be used to inform tailored support for fathers of children with ADHD.

### Method

**Data collection.** Data was collected over a two-week period (in September 2023) from a social media forum. The following search terms were entered into the forums' own search engine to identify all potentially relevant posts: 'dad and ADHD' OR 'father and ADHD'. A total of 67 posts met the predefined inclusion criteria and were extracted for analysis.

**Participants.** All the posts were written online in English over the previous three years and posted by fathers/step-fathers\* of children with diagnosed/undiagnosed/suspected ADHD.

**Data analysis.** Inductive content analysis was used to divide the posts into meaningful categories. The content analysis was carried out with reference to the procedure outlined by Elo & Kyngäs (2008): (1) general codes were assigned to each post (2) related codes were grouped into categories. Following this procedure, a total of 62 posts were divided into 7 categories (5 of the initial 67 posts were excluded because they did not fit into any category).

**Ethical considerations.** Since the social media forum was open to the general public, we were not required to obtain consent from the authors of the posts. To protect participants' privacy, personal details (e.g., names) were not used during the analysis and the social media website has not been identified (British Psychological Society, 2021).

\* For the purpose of this study, we assumed that a person identifies as a father if they refer to themselves as a father/dad or if they have posted their message onto a sub-forum specifically intended for fathers/dads

### Discussion

In the largest category of posts, fathers described the impact that caregiving had on their emotional well-being. Given the barriers to fathers accessing support services, our findings highlight a need for health professionals to consider what can be done to support fathers emotionally.

Our analysis also indicated that fathers used the forum as resource to find support and learn about ADHD. This highlights the importance of online forums in fathers' knowledge and information sharing. Healthcare providers should leverage online forums by incorporating them into their provisions of paternal support.

An online forum or social network site developed and facilitated by healthcare providers would allow fathers to easily access emotional and informational support from other fathers who share similar experiences and also health professionals with expertise in ADHD (StGeorge & Fletcher, 2011).

### Results

Table 1. Description and illustrative examples of fathers' online posts included each category

Category	n	Description	Example quote
Impact of caregiving on fathers' emotional wellbeing	19	Fathers were profoundly affected by caring for their child with ADHD and wrote postings describing role dissatisfaction and/or negative parental feelings towards the child.	"He requires constant parenting attention and it's exhausting...I am so resentful of my son."
Parenting strategies and discipline procedures	15	Fathers were desperate for advice after trying various strategies and interventions to manage their child's behaviours with little to no success.	"I have tried everything I can think of from talking softly to behaviour modification. But nothing works."
Finding support and learning about ADHD	13	Fathers posted questions on the forum to find the appropriate schools and doctors for their child and also to learn more about ADHD (e.g., how to identify whether their child has ADHD).	"My main concern is finding the best education path for my daughter. Does anyone have any recommendations?"
School experience	12	Fathers described how their child's ADHD symptoms impacted their peer interactions and ability to focus on school work. The posts also indicated some tension between fathers and teaching staff.	"Even when we get called into school the teachers become very judgemental and it hurts."
Interparental conflict	11	Fathers experienced challenges within their spousal interactions and disagreement concerning their approaches to parenting.	"Every time me and my wife discuss how to parent our child she just tosses my ideas into the bin."
Lack of support	6	Fathers described their impoverished support network and the lack of support they received from healthcare professionals.	"I've been told that it may be years before my son can be seen by a therapist."
Challenges within the family dynamic	4	Fathers described difficulty among family members and the added challenges they faced because of it.	"There is even more stress because our son's biological father refuses to accept that he has ADHD"

Note. The number of posts in each category (n) does not add up to the total number of posts (N = 62) because some posts fit into more than one category; all quotes have been paraphrased to protect participants' privacy.

### Limitations and Future Research

As this analysis used publicly available data, it was not possible to determine post authors demographic characteristics (e.g., age). Moreover, data was only collected from one social media forum which produced a small sample size. Subsequently, this limits generalisability and restricts our research from making wider conclusions about the experiences of all fathers of children with ADHD.

Future research should examine a larger spread of data among different online forums and support our findings with interviews of fathers posting in the forums. This will allow for researchers to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of father's experiences about parenting a child with ADHD.

### References

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