

# Storytelling and Support: Analyzing Podcasts as a Tool for Emotional Resilience in Parents of Children with Special Needs

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## ABSTRACT

Podcasts, as on-demand digital audio programs, offer a convenient and flexible medium for accessing information, entertainment, and storytelling across diverse topics. For parents of persons with disabilities (PWD), especially mothers, who often face immense physical, emotional, and mental challenges, podcasts hold untapped potential as a secondary medium for support. These parents frequently lack the time or opportunity to engage with traditional media, making podcasts an accessible alternative for learning, connection, and empowerment.

This study explores the use of podcasts as a tool for education, motivation, experience sharing, and emotional resilience among mothers of children with special needs. The research is guided by three key objectives: (1) to identify the potential of podcasts as a companion for parents of children with disabilities, (2) to assess the impact of podcasts in empowering mothers by enhancing their confidence and advocacy skills, and (3) to evaluate the role of podcasts in facilitating community-building and emotional support networks.

A qualitative methodology was adopted using focus group analysis. Two distinct groups, each consisting of 8 mothers of PWD children, were formed based on age demographics: one group below 50 years of age and the other above 50 years. Insights derived from these discussions highlight the significant role podcasts can play in supporting and strengthening these often-overlooked caregivers.

**Keywords:** Podcast, PWD, Resilience, Empowerment, Community-building

## INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows about radio and its benefits. First, it is an audio medium. It covers a wide range and doesn't require literacy to enjoy its programs. Most importantly, radio is a secondary medium. We can listen while doing other tasks. Podcasting is the next step for radio in the digital age. These on-demand audio programs offer great convenience and easy access. They create a personal connection between hosts and listeners.

Podcasting stands out for its democratic nature in content creation and consumption. It needs minimal tech but can reach a global audience quickly. This has led to diverse topics and inclusivity, especially for marginalized communities. Podcasts serve many roles globally: they educate, entertain, persuade, and support us in our struggles.

For parents of children with special needs, especially mothers who take on much of the caregiving, podcasts are an untapped resource for support and empowerment. They face huge physical, emotional, and social challenges while caring for their disabled child. With the decline of joint families, time constraints, and geographical barriers, support can be hard to find. This research looks at how podcasting can change isolated caregiving into connected advocacy. It relies on qualitative analysis of focus group discussions with mothers of children with disabilities in Kerala. Parenting a child with special needs brings unique challenges that go beyond regular caregiving. Mothers often take on the primary caregiver role, handling healthcare, education, emotional, physical, and social needs.

The digital revolution has changed how we access information and connect with others, opening new doors for support. Podcasts, as on-demand audio content, have proven to be a strong way to reach underserved groups. Unlike traditional media, they provide flexibility and accessibility for busy caregivers. Peer support can help meet the complex needs of parents raising children with neuro disorders (Chen et al., 2023). This study highlights the role of podcasts in building virtual peer networks for parents. Sharing experiences and insights from peers is vital for support.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dabrowska and Pisula (2010) described the stress and strain experienced by the parents of disabled students, especially mothers. They pointed that, compared to fathers, mothers stress level is high because all most the entire family, mothers are the caregivers. In the case of disabled children, the case is not changed or mothers have to take more responsibilities. The concept of “chronic sorrow” introduced by Olshansky (1962) and later Roos(2002) expanded it; revealed the struggles face by mothers throughout their disabled child’s development. Research by Ammari et al. (2014) explained the importance of peer group support through the experience sharing and motivation. Through this peers’ support they can build resilience. But at the same time researchers include the audio format only of the podcasts as its limitation. McClung and Johnson (2010) identified the advantages of podcasts as it is used as a tool for education, information and community formation. They used the term “parasocial” which means the podcast listeners develop emotional connections with hosts and content. So the parents of disabled children can develop emotional attachment with podcast contents. The study also revealed that the intimacy between host and listener should develop emotional support. The research by Berry (2016) emphasized the importance of podcast communities and how the shared experience develop empathy among listeners. The special features of podcast like convenience, with our own environment etc make the podcast more popular and best companion to caregivers.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Social Support Theory by Cohen Wills (1985)

Wills introduced two mechanisms for Social Support; stress- buffering effect and main effect. According to him, if the society has these two mechanisms, the members of the society can live happily and peacefully. In this study, the researcher found that podcast provide both these mechanisms. Emotional support is the stress buffering effect and informational support is the main effect to the parents of disabled children.

### Research Objectives

- (1) To identify the potential of podcasts as a companion for parents of children with disabilities.** This objective tries to explore how podcast can serve as sources of information, awareness, and companionship.
- (2) To assess the impact of podcasts in empowering mothers by enhancing their confidence and advocacy skills.** This objective tries to find out how does podcasts works as the provider of confidence, persuasion, advocacy etc.
- (3) To evaluate the role of podcasts in facilitating community-building and emotional support networks.** This objective tries to examine how does podcast create network of social support.

## METHODOLOGY

Researcher uses the Qualitative Research Methodology and Focus Group Analysis research design. The study involves 16 mothers of children with disabilities, all are the members of Charisma (Mothers Collective in Different Art Centre, Magic Planet). Charisma is the unit started for mothers of disabled children who are the regular students at Different Art Centre (DAC), located at Thiruvananthapuram, started by Magician Gopinath Muthukadu. These moms spend their time there from 9.30 am to 5.00 pm by engaging handicraft and stitching. At the same time their wards engage in different art activities.

16 moms were divided into two focus groups based on their age.

Group 1- 8 moms below 50 years of age

Group 2- 8 moms above 50 years of age.

This age-based division helps the researcher to identify the generational **differences** in their technology consumption patterns.

### **Rationale of the Methodology**

The present study focuses exclusively on mothers of children with disabilities (PwD) who are associated with the Different Art Centre (DAC). The researcher intentionally excluded fathers, trainers, management members, and other relatives from the sample in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, emotional struggles, and caregiving responsibilities of mothers. The decision to concentrate on mothers is based on both social realities and practical observations.

In the Indian social context, mothers are generally the primary caregivers of children, especially children with disabilities. Even in the twenty-first century, Indian society largely continues to follow a patriarchal system in which domestic responsibilities, childcare, and emotional caregiving are predominantly assigned to women. As a result, mothers often bear the major burden of caring for children with disabilities, including managing their daily activities, health care, education, emotional well-being, and social interactions. Compared to fathers or other family members, mothers usually spend more time with the child and remain deeply involved in every aspect of the child's life.

Another important reason for selecting mothers as respondents is the unique emotional bond shared between mothers and children with disabilities. Mothers often demonstrate unconditional love, patience, sacrifice, compassion, and resilience while caring for their children. They tend to find happiness and meaning even in the smallest achievements of their child, which strengthens the emotional attachment between the mother and the child. Due to this close relationship, mothers are able to provide rich insights into the emotional, social, and practical challenges involved in raising a child with disabilities.

The researcher also observed that, in many cases, mothers accompany their children to the DAC and spend considerable time there. For many of these women, the DAC functions not only as a support system for the child but also as a space of emotional relief and social interaction for themselves. Since caregiving responsibilities are often unshared within the family, mothers experience significant physical, emotional, and psychological stress. Therefore, studying their experiences becomes highly relevant for understanding the realities of disability care within families.

Hence, the researcher has limited the study to mothers of children with disabilities in order to explore their perspectives, struggles, coping mechanisms, and emotional experiences in a focused and meaningful manner.

### **Data Collection**

Focus group discussions were arranged in a suitable and comfortable place at DAC, which encourage free and genuine sharing. Each session continued 60-90 minutes and recorded with participants' permission. It was like semi-structured interview which covers their technology consumption pattern, existing podcasts, their interest in listening podcasts, learning and empowering experiences, community connections and challenges in podcast consumption.

### **Findings and Analysis**

The focus group members are from diverse background in terms of their wards' disabilities, family setup, educational, social and economic status. Children's disabilities include autism spectrum disorders, cerebral

palsy, Down syndrome, intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities. The moms' age ranged from 40 to 63 years.

### **Objectives Analysis**

Both focus groups agreed that podcasts are a helpful resource. As a secondary medium, they fit easily into busy schedules, like caregiving. Participants noted that traditional media, such as newspapers, TV, or books, require full attention, while podcasts do not. They can listen to podcasts at their convenience. The participants visit the DAC daily with their disabled children and all own smartphones. Each participant has listened to podcasts about managing disabilities, related diseases, behavioral issues, and remedies at least once.

Both groups shared that during long, sleepless nights, podcasts become their companions. They spend nearly six hours at the DAC, allowing ample time to enjoy their favorite shows. Disability-related podcasts are particularly popular. Participants felt less isolated after hearing other parents' stories. This helps normalize their struggles and emotions, reducing feelings of guilt. One participant shared, "I don't have to get over it and be strong all the time."

This theme highlights the stress-relieving role of social support. Mothers find validation in podcast narratives, helping them face complex feelings. They recognize their experiences deserve to be shared, not viewed as personal failures.

Participants also realized that podcasts are a major source of reliable information about disabilities, educational strategies, therapies, and advocacy techniques. This information empowers them to make strong decisions for their children. One said, "I learned more therapy approaches through podcasts that our doctors never mentioned." Another added, "I knew my rights and how to advocate for my child's needs." The researcher noted that podcasts serve as informal educational tools alongside formal support services.

Many participants felt connected to others facing similar issues. One participant mentioned, "I will follow the podcast's Facebook group and support other parents." Another stated, "We may not meet in person, but we share our feelings and support each other." The researcher found that the variety of podcast consumption creates flexible participation opportunities.

All participants agreed that regular podcast listening helps them achieve emotional stability, relieve stress, and find motivation to care for their disabled children. Some noted that podcasts helped them build emotional resilience to face life's challenges. One participant said, "Podcasts are my refreshment; after listening, I feel recharged." Another from group two shared, "Podcasts are my medicine; whenever I feel overwhelmed, I listen to others' experiences." The researcher concluded that regular podcast listening offers parents consistent emotional support and mental health benefits.

After the discussion, the researcher found that group one (younger mothers) is more likely to use social media for podcasts and engage with online communities. In contrast, group two (older mothers) discovers podcasts through word-of-mouth recommendations. This generational difference reflects broader trends in technology use and media consumption. Nonetheless, both groups gain significant benefits from podcast content. While podcasts lack visual elements, their audio format provides flexibility that other media cannot.

### **Limitations of the study**

The main limitation of this study is its focus on a specific area. The researcher selects DAC and its podcast users for the study. Excluding non-users and their views poses major challenges. Additionally, the sample size is limited to two groups, total of 16 members.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research shows how podcasts can help mothers of children with special needs. They offer emotional support, education, motivation, confidence, and community building. The findings indicate that podcasts provide companionship during tough times and practical education for empowerment.

The study had three clear objectives. First, podcasts can be a flexible companion for parents, offering accessible support for caregiving. Second, they empower mothers by sharing knowledge, skills, and advocacy tools. Third, podcasts help build community networks, reducing time constraints and geographical barriers.

Age differences affect podcast listening habits, but the support they provide is more important. The study identified challenges that need improved technology support for all mothers of disabled children. Parents describe podcasting as an underused resource with great potential.

We should focus on creating advanced podcasts to help struggling mothers. The storytelling nature of podcasts fits well with the emotional and informational needs of these parents. The findings will benefit podcast creators, educators, and policymakers. Podcasts are a valuable tool for family support resources.

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