

Inclusive Education for Autism Spectrum Disorders: Experience of Support From the Perspective of Parents/Caregivers in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

Teaching assistants are essential for inclusion because they provide individualized support that enables children with developmental disabilities to participate, learn and thrive alongside their peers in mainstream educational settings. The aim of study is to examine differences in the attitudes of parents of children with developmental disabilities and parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) regarding their children's inclusive education. The study sample consisted of parents of children with ASD and other developmental disabilities. A random sample include 62 parents of children with different types of disabilities (ASD=30; other developmental disabilities=32). To examine parents' attitudes, the questionnaire "Attitudes of Parents of Children with disabilities toward Teaching Assistants in the Tuzla Canton" was developed specifically for the purposes of this study. The findings indicate there are no statistically significant differences in attitudes toward teaching assistants between parents of children with ASD and those of children with other developmental disabilities and no significant relationship was found between the child's age and parental attitudes. By providing insight into parental attitudes, the study contributes to a better understanding of the perceived value and challenges of assistant support in inclusive education and offers a foundation for future research and policy development in this field.

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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent challenges in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities. The challenges faced by students with ASD include difficulties in social interaction, communication, sensory sensitivities, academic support and adaptation, behavioral and emotional regulation, peer acceptance, teachers' knowledge and training, collaboration and executive functioning. It emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing these challenges to create an inclusive learning environment (Debasu & Chekol, 2024).

There is a considerable amount of research on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Dizdarevic et al., 2017), but fewer studies focus on the attitudes of parents of children with developmental disabilities regarding teaching assistants. According to literature, for the implementation of inclusion, the attitudes towards inclusive education as well as the perception of inclusive teaching practices and resources are important factors. Research indicate that the predictors for parents' attitudes towards inclusive education depend on the specific type of disability, showed that parents' attitudes towards the inclusion of a student with a physical disability or learning disability were rather positive, while the attitudes towards students with behavioral disorders or mental disabilities were rather neutral (Kast & Schwab, 2023). Paseka & Schwab (2020) indicate that parents of children with special needs tend to express ambivalent attitudes toward inclusion, recognizing both its benefits and potential risks for their children. They generally agree that inclusive education can be beneficial for all children. Overall, more positive attitudes are associated with higher parental education levels and prior experience with inclusive settings, while perceptions also vary depending on the type of disability—stronger support is typically shown for children with physical and sensory impairments, and more skepticism toward inclusion of children with behavioral difficulties or more severe cognitive disabilities. Additionally, beyond attitudes, teaching practices and the availability of resources are identified as key factors for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Similar results indicate Khalid & Alali (2025) whit results that showed a moderate level of positive attitudes from both parents and teachers toward including children with disabilities in mainstream education. No significant differences were observed based on the gender of the students with disabilities. The attitudes varied significantly by disability type, favoring students with motor disabilities over those with sensory impairments, and least for those with intellectual disabilities highlighting specific areas of concern. These variations highlight the necessity for tailored interventions that address the specific needs associated with different types of disabilities. Bowles et al. (2018) emphasize that teaching assistants play a very important role, primarily in providing emotional support and curricula support fostering students' independence, supporting interpersonal relationships and contributing to the improvement of relationships among all participants in this process.

A teaching assistant represents daily support not only for a child with special educational needs, but also for the classroom as a whole. They assist the teacher and the special education teacher in implementing instructional goals and carrying out the individualized education program. In addition, the teaching assistant participates in the overall functioning of the classroom and collaborates with other teachers within the school staff with the aim of improving educational conditions for the child with special educational needs.

A teaching assistant is a form of support for students with special educational needs included in the mainstream education system and represents one of the key factor for the successful acquisition of knowledge and skills - not only for children with special needs, but for all

students within an inclusive classroom (Lapat, 2013). The competencies required of a teaching assistant include effective communication and interaction with children, teachers, and parents; flexibility and creativity in work; teamwork skills; basic literacy and numeracy skills; the ability to manage challenging student behavior; as well as personal qualities such as tolerance, patience and initiative (Igrić i Fuček, 2011).

In the 2022/2023 school year teaching assistants were introduced for the first time in schools in the Tuzla Canton area as support for inclusive education. The presence of a teaching assistant is one of the essential prerequisites for high-quality inclusive education for students who have:

- significant motor disability
- difficulties in communication and social interaction associated with autism spectrum disorders
- sensory disability related to vision or hearing loss that prevent independent participation in educational activities
- behavioral difficulties that significantly interfere with functioning and pose risks to their own physical safety or the safety of other students
- multiple (combined) disabilities consisting of several milder forms of the above-mentioned challenges
- an official decision recommending of adapted form of schooling with the support of a teaching assistant

For the successful implementation of inclusive education, it is necessary to ensure effective collaboration between teachers, special education teachers and teaching assistants.

Parents' attitudes toward inclusive education and their perceptions of inclusive teaching practices and resources, particularly in the form of additional support to teachers through teaching assistants, represent one of the key prerequisites for the successful implementation of inclusive education.

The general aim of this study is to examine differences in the attitudes of parents of children with developmental disabilities and parents of children with ASD regarding their children's inclusive education with a particular focus on teaching practices and support resources.

Specific research objectives:

- To examine the attitudes of parents of children with developmental disabilities and parents of children with autism spectrum disorders toward teaching assistants;
- To determine differences in attitudes toward teaching assistants between parents of children with autism spectrum disorders and parents of children with other types of disabilities;
- To examine the relationship between the child's age and parents' attitudes toward teaching assistants.

HYPOTHESES

H1: There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes toward teacher assistants in inclusive settings between parents of children with ASD and parents of children with other developmental disabilities

H2: There is a statistically significant correlation between age of children with ASD/other developmental disabilities and parent's attitudes toward teacher assistant in inclusive settings

Methods

Sample

The study sample consisted of parents of children with ASD and other developmental disabilities involved in providing support from teaching assistant in inclusive settings. A random sample include 62 parents of children with different types of disabilities. The sample consisted of parents of children with ASD (46,8%) and parents of children with other developmental disabilities (53,2%).

Table 1.

Frequency and percentage of children with developmental disabilities in relation to type of disability

Type of disabilities	N	%
ASD	30	46,8
ADHD	9	14,5
Down syndrome	3	4,8
Multiple	10	16,1
Hearing disability	2	4,8
Motoric disability	8	12,9
Total	62	100

The average age of children with developmental disabilities was 11.08 with a standard deviation of 2.43. the age range ranged from 6 to 15 years, where most respondents belonged to the age group of up to 11 years - 60% of children with developmental disabilities.

Instruments

To examine parents' attitudes, the questionnaire "Attitudes of Parents of Children with disabilities toward Teaching Assistants in the Tuzla Canton" was developed specifically for the purposes of this study. The questionnaire consists of two parts: demographic data which collects general demographic information including the child's age and gender and type of developmental disability, and the Attitude Scale related to teaching assistants, consisting of 28 items. Parents were asked to respond to each statement using a five-point Likert-type scale designed to measure the intensity of their attitudes and opinions (1 – strongly agree, 2 – agree, 3 – undecided, 4 – partially disagree, 5 – strongly disagree).

Procedure

The study was conducted among parents of children with disabilities who educate in inclusive settings and have experience with teaching assistant from the Tuzla Canton. Data collection was conducted as online survey using the described assessment instrument. Prior to participation, respondents were provided with written instructions explaining the purpose of the study and guidelines for completing the questionnaire. After being informed about the aims and significance of the research, participants were invited to complete the survey. Participation was anonymous. For each item, respondents selected one of the offered responses, which were subsequently numerically coded and entered into a prepared data matrix. Following data

collection, the data were organized, grouped and analysed in accordance with the defined specific research objectives. Results were entered and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistical parameters (frequency, mean, standard deviation, percentage distribution) were calculated for all questionnaire measures. Differences in attitudes in relation to group of parents were analysed using an independent samples t-test, while significant correlation between age and attitudes of parents were examined using analysis of Pearson correlation.

Results

The findings indicate a wide range of attitudes among parents of children with ASD and other developmental disabilities (ODD), reflecting both positive and negative views toward the work of teaching assistants in inclusive settings.

The 5-point scale (1-strongly agree, 2-agree, 3-undecided, 4-partially disagree, 5-strongly disagree), with higher scores indicating more negative attitudes.

Table 2.

Attitudes of parents of children with ASD and ODD toward teaching assistants

Teaching assistant in education of my child		Mean	SD
... participates in the entire teaching process	ASD	2,46	1,33
	ODD	2,59	1,36
... works during classroom instruction	ASD	2,40	1,19
	ODD	2,31	1,22
... participates in all activities in which the student is involved (receiving the child before school, participating in all subjects the child attends, including breaks, field trips, and toileting)	ASD		
	ODD	2,86	1,27
... welcomes the student, prepares them for lessons, and assists them during instruction	ASD	2,26	1,22
	ODD	2,34	1,40
... supports the student according to the teacher's instructions	ASD	2,09	0,99
	ODD	2,70	1,39
... supports the parent	ASD	2,70	1,39
	ODD	2,50	1,27
... recognizes my child's strengths and supports them	ASD	2,63	1,40
	ODD	2,28	1,32
... gathers and uses content related to the child's everyday life	ASD	2,96	1,35
	ODD	2,56	1,43
... does everything to ensure that children with moderate and severe difficulties are successful	ASD	2,30	1,29
	ODD	2,18	1,11
... motivates the child to complete tasks	ASD	2,10	1,21
	ODD	2,03	0,93
... uses new teaching methods	ASD	3,03	1,27
	ODD	2,84	1,24
... works on building a good relationship with the child and their peers	ASD	2,20	0,25
	ODD	2,12	0,17
... does not limit the child's independence in the learning process through their behavior	ASD	3,66	1,29
	ODD	3,59	1,31

... provides support through physical guidance or by directing the child's attention	ASD	2,36	1,32
	ODD	2,18	0,99
... becomes a substitute for the child's friends	ASD	3,10	1,26
	ODD	3,43	1,29
... directs the student to work and redirects them to the task when they have attention difficulties	ASD	2,03	1,21
	ODD	2,25	1,10
... appropriately assesses situations during class when the student does not need assistance and allows them to complete tasks independently	ASD	2,33	1,29
	ODD	2,31	0,96
... possesses well-developed collaboration skills	ASD	2,43	1,40
	ODD	2,12	1,03
... demonstrates an appropriate level of empathy toward the child	ASD	2,20	1,15
	ODD	1,96	0,96
... communicates with the child while respecting the characteristics of their disability	ASD	2,16	1,23
	ODD	1,93	0,94
... shows sufficient interest in additional ways of supporting the student	ASD	3,73	1,31
	ODD	4,15	1,05
... is aware of the importance of the work they perform	ASD	3,66	1,56
	ODD	4,18	1,09
... should become much more familiar with the description of their role	ASD	2,93	1,65
	ODD	2,87	1,49
... should be provided with much more information about the job, and should also show greater interest in it	ASD	2,50	1,65
	ODD	2,37	1,26
... selection of teaching assistants should be based on their professional background	ASD	1,40	0,85
	ODD	1,76	1,12
... it is important that all teaching assistants undergo the same training program	ASD	1,50	1,04
	ODD	1,62	0,90
... it is important that training for teaching assistants is delivered by qualified professionals with positive work experience	ASD	1,13	0,34
	ODD	1,31	0,53
... the work of teaching assistants should be regularly supervised	ASD	1,73	1,14
	ODD	1,62	0,87

Based on the results presented in Table 2. can be observed that parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) generally express more positive attitudes toward teaching assistants compared to parents of children with other developmental disorders (ODD), given that lower mean values indicate more favorable perceptions. Specifically, parents of children with ASD report lower mean scores on 17 out of the 28 variables, suggesting a more positive overall evaluation of the assistant's role and performance. When analyzing specific domains, differences between the two groups become more evident. Parents of children with ASD tend to express more positive attitudes in areas related to emotional support, individualization and understanding of the child, such as recognizing the child's strengths (ASD: 2.63; ODD: 2.28), showing empathy (ASD: 2.20; ODD: 1.96) and communicating in accordance with the child's needs (ASD: 2.16; ODD: 1.93). Although these differences are not large, they indicate that assistants working with children with ASD are more positively perceived in terms of relational and individualized support.

In contrast, parents of children with ODD express relatively more positive attitudes in aspects related to structured and instruction-based support. In the variable referring to helping

the student according to the teacher's instructions (ASD: 2.09; ODD: 2.70), as well as in perceptions of the assistant's awareness of their professional role (ASD: 3.66; ODD: 4.18) and interest in additional ways of supporting the student (ASD: 3.73; ODD: 4.15). These findings suggest that parents of children with ODD may place greater emphasis on the assistant's formal role within the instructional framework, although the relatively higher mean values also indicate more critical attitudes in these areas overall.

In terms of participation in the teaching process, both groups report moderately positive attitudes, with slightly more favorable evaluations among parents of children with ASD. For example, assistants' involvement in all aspects of the child's school participation (ASD: 2.86; ODD: 2.68) and their engagement in the overall teaching process (ASD: 2.46; ODD: 2.59) are rated more positively by the ASD group, suggesting that assistants working with children with ASD may be perceived as more consistently present across different school contexts.

An important area of difference related to the social role of the assistant report relatively higher mean values for the statement that the assistant becomes a substitute for the child's friends (ASD: 3.10; ODD: 3.43) with parents of children with ODD expressing slightly more negative attitudes. This may indicate a shared concern that assistants could unintentionally limit peer interaction, with this concern being more pronounced in the ODD group.

Regarding the promotion of independence, both groups show relatively positive attitudes, as reflected in lower mean values for the statement that the assistant does not limit the child's independence (ASD: 3.66; ODD: 3.59). Although these values are higher compared to other items, the similarity between groups suggests a shared perception that assistants generally respect the child's autonomy.

Across both groups, the most positive attitudes are observed in variables related to the need for professionalization of the role. The statement "...it is important to carefully select teaching assistants according to the professional field they come from" is rated as the most favorable, with mean values of 1.13 for parents of children with ASD and 1.31 for parents of children with ODD. Similarly, low mean values are found for the importance of standardized training programs, education delivered by qualified professionals, and regular supervision, indicating strong agreement across both groups that systemic improvements in training and support for teaching assistants are necessary.

On the other hand, more negative attitudes (higher mean values) are consistently observed in areas related to motivation, attention support, and proactive engagement, such as motivating the child to complete tasks (ASD: 2.10; ODD: 2.03) and redirecting attention (ASD: 2.03; ODD: 2.25). These findings suggest that parents perceive these aspects of the assistant's role as less effectively implemented, with only minor differences between the two groups.

Difference in attitudes between parents of children with ASD and other developmental disabilities

An independent samples t-test was used to examine differences in attitudes toward assistant in relation to group of parents (ASD and ODD). The results indicate that the mean score for parents of children with ASD respondents was slightly higher than that for parents of children with ODD respondents, and the standard deviation was also slightly higher among parents of children with ASD. However, the obtained results ($t = 0.223$; $p = 0.823$) indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in attitudes toward assistant between parents of children with ASD and parents of children with ODD.

Table 3.

Differences of attitudes related to group of the parents (ASD and other developmental disabilities)

Variables	Group of respondents	N	AS	SD	t-test	p
	Parent of child with ASD	30	14.51	2.64	.223	.823
	Parent of child with ODD	32	14.19	2.50		

Age of children with disabilities as a factor of attitudes of parents

To examine the relationship between the child's age and parents' attitudes toward teaching assistants, the Pearson correlation coefficient was applied. Based on the results of the correlation analysis presented in Table 4, it can be concluded that, at the 0.01 level of statistical significance, there is no relationship between the child's age and the level of parental satisfaction with the work of teaching assistants.

Table 4.

Correlation between age of children with disabilities and attitudes toward teaching assistants

Variables		Age	Attitudes
Age	r	1	,164
	p		,203
Attitudes	r	,164	1
	p	,203	

Discussion

The more positive perceptions among parents of children with autism may be explained by the nature of autism itself, which often involves challenges in communication, social interaction, and behavior. In such contexts, the presence of a teaching assistant who provides individualized attention, emotional support, and adaptation of communication strategies is particularly valuable. Providing individualized and small group instruction to students with disabilities and managing student behaviours appeared to be the major instructional roles of teacher assistants (Sharma & Salend, 2016).

In contrast, parents of children with other types of disabilities also recognize the importance of teacher assistants, but their expectations may differ. Their perceptions are often more focused on academic assistance, task completion, and physical support, depending on the child's specific needs (Webster et al., 2010). The findings reveal that parents of children with other developmental disorders express relatively more critical attitudes in several domains, particularly regarding the assistant's awareness of their professional role and their engagement in additional support strategies. Romstein & Velki (2017) highlight several systemic challenges related to teaching assistants, including their use as a measure to reduce unemployment, frequent turnover preventing continuity of support, limited duration of employment, low motivation due to job insecurity, inadequate legal regulation, and insufficient training. Zrilić & Jadrijević Tomas (2021) indicates that parents often perceive a lack of professional competence among assistants and express the need for additional training, with some questioning the

suitability of assistants without a pedagogical background. Such ambiguity can result in less effective support and lower satisfaction among parents.

An important finding of this study relates to the perception that teaching assistants may sometimes become a substitute for peer relationships. Similarly, McConkey and Abbott (2011) emphasize that training programs should focus on the specific roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants, as well as the particular needs associated with different types of disabilities. In this sense, while assistants provide essential support, their role must be carefully balanced to promote independence and peer engagement rather than replace it.

Furthermore, the relatively less positive evaluations in areas such as motivating students and maintaining attention are in line with studies indicating that teaching assistants often lack sufficient training in behavior management and instructional strategies (European Parliament, 2017). This suggests that assistants may be more effective in providing general support than in implementing targeted pedagogical interventions, particularly in complex situations involving attention difficulties or behavioral challenges. According to Schneider et al. (2018), the resources of inclusive education can be divided into human resources (teaching and non-teaching staff), teaching and learning materials, and specialized resources. The European Parliament (2017) points out that both the amount of resources and the flexibility in their use vary considerably across Europe. However, adequate resources are essential for successful inclusive education.

One of the most consistent findings across both groups of parents is the strong agreement on the need for improved professionalization of the teaching assistant role. Parents expressed highly positive attitudes toward statements emphasizing the importance of proper selection criteria, standardized training, education delivered by qualified professionals, and regular supervision. These findings strongly support existing literature, which highlights that the effectiveness of teaching assistants largely depends on the quality of their training, clarity of their role, and the level of collaboration with teachers (European Parliament, 2017).

In addition, the relatively low standard deviations in several variables indicate a high level of agreement among parents, suggesting that these perceptions are not isolated but rather reflect broader, shared experiences within inclusive education settings. However, higher variability in certain items also points to differences in the quality of assistant support, which may depend on contextual factors such as training, school resources, and individual competencies. Devolli and Zabeli (2024) emphasize that schools should meet the necessary conditions for children with special needs, including the provision of teacher assistants for these students. They also highlight that infrastructural conditions in schools need to be improved in the future in order for inclusion to have positive effects.

Conclusion

Research shows that inclusive settings can promote not only academic development but also social competence, empathy, and acceptance among all students (De Boer et al., 2010). For children with disabilities, inclusion provides opportunities for peer interaction, improved communication skills, and a greater sense of belonging within the school community. At the same time, typically developing peers benefit from exposure to diversity, which fosters tolerance and reduces stigma.

In conclusion, while both groups of parents generally express moderately positive attitudes toward teaching assistants, parents of children with autism tend to evaluate their role slightly more favorably overall. The differences between the groups indicate that assistants working with children with ASD are perceived as stronger in providing individualized and emotional support, whereas teaching assistants working with children with other developmental disorders

are more associated with structured, instruction-based support but also receive more critical evaluations in certain professional domains. Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) consistently report the highest reliance on teaching assistants, often viewing their presence as essential for successful inclusion (Gómez-León, 2023). This is largely due to the specific characteristics of autism, including difficulties in social communication, sensory sensitivities, and behavioral unpredictability, which require structured and continuous support within the classroom. Consequently, these parents tend to emphasize the need for well-trained assistants and close collaboration between teachers, assistants, and families.

At the same time, both groups strongly agree on the need for improved training, clearer role definition, and ongoing supervision, highlighting key areas for the further development of inclusive educational practice. Inclusive education is considered essential for achieving long-term social inclusion and participation. As noted by UNESCO (2018), education systems that adopt inclusive principles contribute to more cohesive and equitable societies by reducing discrimination and promoting equal opportunities for all individuals. However, successful implementation of inclusion requires systemic support, including teacher training, accessible learning environments, and the availability of support services such as teaching assistants. The findings of this study confirm and extend previous research by highlighting both the strengths and challenges associated with the role of teaching assistants in inclusive education. While assistants are recognized as valuable contributors to the educational process, particularly in supporting children with autism, there remains a clear need for systemic improvements. These include better-defined roles, enhanced training programs, and ongoing professional support to ensure that assistants can effectively contribute not only to academic outcomes but also to the social inclusion and independence of students. Overall, the literature suggests that while teaching assistants are widely valued across all groups, parents of children with autism demonstrate the strongest perception of their necessity, highlighting the importance of tailoring inclusive support services to the specific needs of different student populations. Despite its recognized importance, inclusion also presents challenges, particularly when adequate resources and support are lacking. Studies indicate that the effectiveness of inclusive education depends significantly on the quality of support provided and the attitudes of educators, parents, and policymakers. It is important perception of the students with disabilities. There was a limited number of studies examining the perceptions of students with disabilities regarding their experiences with teacher assistants. It would be interesting to see if the experiences of students with high incidence disabilities differ from those of students with low incidence disabilities as well as how students without disabilities view the roles, efficacy, and presence of teacher assistant in their classrooms (Sharma and Salend, 2016).

Conflict of Interest

None.

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