

Reflections on Disability Parenting: Perspectives of Japanese Mothers Whose Children Attend an Elementary Special Support School

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ABSTRACT

Raising a child with disabilities involves complex emotional, relational, and caregiving demands that may reshape how mothers understand parenting, child development, and everyday life. However, dominant understandings of disability parenting remain framed by normative developmental expectations, ideals of maternal self-sacrifice, and an emphasis on caregiving burden and coping. Such framings may overlook how mothers actively reconsider socially prescribed standards, reconstruct their caregiving roles, and derive meaning while continuing to experience hardship. This study therefore explored how Japanese mothers of children with disabilities reflected on the ways their caregiving experiences had shaped their perspectives on motherhood, child development, personal wellbeing, relationships, and everyday life. Written interviews were distributed to mothers of third-grade students at an elementary special support school in Japan. Eleven completed responses were returned and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four interconnected themes were developed from the mothers' narratives: (1) deconstructing normality, reflecting mothers' questioning of social comparison, conventional developmental expectations, and assumptions about how children should develop; (2) reframing caregiving through self-compassion, illustrating the recognition that maternal wellbeing, personal limitations, and emotional vulnerability are integral to sustainable caregiving; (3) redressing isolation through support-seeking, highlighting the importance of family, peer, professional, and community support in reducing solitary caregiving responsibility; and (4) finding meaning in hardship, highlighting mothers' reflections on gratitude, broadened perspectives, enriched relationships, personal growth, authenticity, and a renewed appreciation of everyday life despite ongoing challenges. The findings, collectively, demonstrate that mothers' reflections extended beyond descriptions of burden and coping to reconsidering conventional developmental expectations, caregiving, social support, and their understanding of a fulfilling life.

Keywords: (Children with Disabilities, Parenting, Mothers, Qualitative Research, Japan)

INTRODUCTION

Parenting a child with a disability can involve responsibilities and experiences beyond those normally associated with parenting. Depending on the nature and extent of a child's needs, parents may be involved in healthcare, therapy, developmental support, education and welfare services alongside the daily responsibilities of family life (Cole et al., 2025). Such demands may be ongoing across various stages of childhood and may be accompanied by uncertainty about children's development, future care, and access to appropriate support (Hanson & Hanline, 1990; Raina et al., 2005; Resch et al., 2010). The experience of caregiving for parents of children with disabilities is thus influenced by various domains, including the interaction of children's needs, family circumstances, available resources, and social relations.

Mothers are particularly important in this caregiving context, as they often assume much of the responsibility for the day-to-day care of children and the coordination of services (Scott, 2018). In Japan, childcare and

domestic work are heavily gendered, although individual family arrangements vary (Lee, 2010; Porter & Loveland, 2019). Studies in Japan have demonstrated higher psychological distress in mothers raising children with disabilities than mothers of children without disabilities (Yamaoka et al., 2016) and lack of social support has been associated with poorer maternal wellbeing and greater caregiving burden (Moriwaki et al., 2022; Porter & Loveland, 2019; Yamaoka et al., 2015). This evidence is important in establishing the substantial demands that mothers may experience in parenting a child with disability, and the resources required to support them.

Yet an emphasis on burden, stress and coping provides only a partial understanding of mothers' experiences. Research has increasingly recognised that difficult caregiving experiences may coexist with positive perceptions, changed priorities, personal learning and valued aspects of parenting (Corman, 2009; Gupta & Kumar, 2020; Hastings et al., 2002). Importantly, recognising such experiences does not require hardship to be minimised or disability parenting to be portrayed as inherently transformative. Rather, it raises questions about how mothers themselves make sense of their experiences over time: how they reconsider assumptions about their children and themselves, understand their own needs as caregivers, relate to others for support, and interpret experiences that may simultaneously encompass difficulty and value. Understanding mothers' own reflections may therefore complement established research on caregiving burden by illuminating how experiences of disability parenting are understood in relation to motherhood, child development, personal wellbeing, relationships and what mothers come to value in life. Such an approach avoids positioning maternal experience exclusively through either adversity or positive adaptation and instead allows both to be considered within the same account.

Against this background, the present study explores the reflections of Japanese mothers whose children attend an elementary special support school. Rather than examining a single diagnostic group, the study draws on mothers of children with varied disability profiles and uses written qualitative accounts to examine how they make sense of their caregiving experiences. This study sets out to answer the following question: How do Japanese mothers of disabled children reflect on how their experiences of caregiving have affected their view of motherhood, child development, personal wellbeing, relationships and everyday life? The study seeks to foreground mothers' retrospective reflections to contribute a deeper understanding of disability parenting that acknowledges continuing hardship but remains attentive to changes in perspective, supportive interdependence and the meanings mothers attach to their experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Distinctive Nature of Disability Parenting

Parenting inherently involves responsibility for children's development and wellbeing, yet raising a child with disabilities may introduce caregiving demands that differ in intensity, duration and complexity from those typically encountered in parenting (Brekke & Alecu, 2023; Vinck & Van Lancker, 2020). Parents may take on multiple, overlapping roles that go above and beyond the routine care of the family, navigating medical and developmental interventions, therapy, educational provision and welfare services while managing everyday family responsibilities (Hanson & Hanline, 1990; Raina et al., 2005). These demands may require additional financial, emotional, social and physical resources and can extend across children's developmental and educational trajectories (Ali et al., 2021; Wondemu et al., 2022).

The distinctiveness of disability parenting, however, cannot be reduced to the amount of care provided. Parenting a child with a disability could reflect a rough roadmap that involves operating in an ongoing state of chronic instability and unpredictability that is shaped by uncertainty surrounding children's development, changing support requirements, social responses to disability and the fit between families' needs and available resources (Choi, 2025). Resch et al. (2010) reported that many of parents' challenges related to caregiving of a child with disability were due to the mismatch of caregiving needs or demands and access to various necessary environmental supports, such as informational resources, various service provisions or financial support, besides family social support. According to Hanson and Hanline (1990), parental adaptation to a child with a disability reflects an interplay between child characteristics, caregiving demands, parental resources and formal and informal support rather than disability itself producing a uniform family outcome. Disability parenting is therefore better understood as relational and contextually situated than as a predetermined experience of burden.

Disability Parenting and Maternal Wellbeing

Although disability parenting concerns whole families, mothers remain especially prominent within the literature because they frequently undertake substantial caregiving and coordination responsibilities (Scott, 2018; Zulfia & Allenidekania, 2020). Research has documented cultural expectations that position mothers as primarily responsible for children's care and behaviour, while fathers' long working hours and comparatively limited involvement in childcare can constrain the informal support available to mothers (Porter & Loveland, 2019). According to Tanaka et al. (2026), Japanese women dedicate approximately seven hours per day to unpaid caregiving activities, which is more than four times the amount of time spent by men. These contextual patterns should not be assumed to characterise every Japanese family, but they provide an important background for understanding why maternal wellbeing warrants particular attention.

A substantial body of research demonstrates that caring for children with disabilities can affect parents' psychological and physical wellbeing. Scherer et al. (2019), for example, found elevated depression and anxiety among parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Katkić et al. (2017) report that parents of children with disabilities suffer greater stress levels than do parents of typically developing children. Matambanadzo and Rhoda (2024) emphasise that providing care for children with special needs has a significant impact on caregivers, negatively affecting their mental, physical and financial well-being. A study by Cheng and Lai (2023) revealed differences in parental stress levels between fathers and mothers of children with disabilities, with mothers perceiving higher stress levels than fathers, which may be induced by the major caring role shouldered by the mother. Scheibner et al. (2024) also found that mothers of impaired children are significantly more strained and reported higher stress than fathers which also link to the mothers self-identity as the primary caregiver for the child, whereas fathers see themselves as the breadwinner and provider.

Beyond the ongoing challenges, modern research places growing emphasis on the positive perceptions, adaptation, and rewarding aspects of parenting a child with a disability. Cole et al. (2025) highlight that families caring for a child with a neuro-disability report positive transformations: personal growth, stronger social bonds, and advocacy skills. Gupta & Kumar (2020) found that positive maternal perceptions have important implications for mothers of children with disabilities, encouraging the use of effective coping strategies linked to improved psychological well-being. Corman (2009) demonstrates mothers' reflections on caregiving a child with autism as often positive and occasionally joyous. Hastings et al. (2002) highlight that mothers' perceptions of their children with intellectual disabilities as catalysts for personal growth and maturity are linked to more positive coping strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

An exploratory qualitative design was used to explore mothers' reflections on raising a child with a disability and how their experiences had shaped their understandings of motherhood, child development, personal wellbeing, relationships and everyday life. Since the goal of this study was to explore how participants understand and interpret their own experiences and reflections, rather than to assess predetermined aspects of their caregiving experiences, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate.

Research Instrument

Data were collected through a self-administered written qualitative interview comprising 18 open-ended questions, informed by synthesised empirical findings on disability caregiving. The questions addressed participants' personal and caregiving circumstances, experiences of raising a child with a disability, and reflections on how raising a child with a disability had influenced their lives and perspectives.

The interview questions were initially developed in English and translated into Japanese by a bilingual Japanese scholar who was a member of the research team. An independent back-translation was subsequently undertaken to examine correspondence between the Japanese and English versions. Attention was given to preserving the

intended meaning of the questions rather than relying solely on literal linguistic equivalence. Discrepancies identified through this process were considered before the Japanese version was used for data collection.

The written interview format enabled participants to respond to the questions privately and at a time convenient to them. Participants were invited to answer freely and could leave any question unanswered if they did not wish to respond. The study therefore sought considered written reflections rather than requiring participants to respond to every question.

Eligibility, Sampling and Recruitment

The study established predetermined eligibility criteria to identify mothers whose circumstances were relevant to the research. To be eligible, participants were required to be mothers who were providing care for a child with a disability; the child was required to be aged 18 years or younger and to reside in the same household as the mother. For the purposes of the study, disability was understood within the framework provided by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), which recognises persons with disabilities as including those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. The age criterion was informed by the international framework provided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989).

Following institutional ethical approval, the researchers contacted an elementary special support school in Japan by email to request permission to conduct the study. The school agreed to support the study but required that it decide how the interview materials would be distributed, which prevented the researchers from identifying or selecting individual mothers. Although the school's decision to distribute the study materials to third-grade mothers restricted the recruitment pool, all mothers who participated met the eligibility criteria set by the researchers. Thus, limiting participation to third-grade mothers was part of the school-mediated recruitment process rather than an additional eligibility criterion.

Designated school personnel distributed written information about the study, interview materials, and consent documentation to potential participants. Mothers who chose to participate completed the written interview and returned it with the consent documentation, following the study's established procedure. The researchers received 11 completed written interviews, which formed the dataset analysed.

Data Analysis

The written responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis involved familiarisation with the complete dataset, systematic coding across participants' responses, examination of relationships and patterns across codes, and iterative development and refinement of candidate themes. Coding was undertaken across the corpus, allowing patterns of meaning to be considered across participants' accounts.

Consistent with a reflexive thematic approach, themes were not treated as categories that simply emerged from the data or as summaries determined by the frequency with which particular issues were mentioned. Rather, themes were developed through an interpretative and recursive process involving movement between individual responses, coded material and the developing thematic structure. Candidate themes were repeatedly reviewed against the dataset to examine their internal coherence, distinctiveness and capacity to illuminate meaningful patterns across participants' reflections. Attention was also given to differences and contrasting accounts to avoid presenting participants' experiences as homogeneous.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Characteristics

The final sample comprised 11 mothers who met the study's predetermined eligibility criteria and whose children attended the third grade of the participating elementary special support school. The mothers represented varied personal, family and employment circumstances. Among participants who reported their age, mothers ranged

from their 30s to their late 40s. Their employment circumstances were diverse and included full-time and part-time employment, and non-participation in paid employment. Occupational backgrounds among those in paid employment included education, healthcare, child-development and other service-related work. Family circumstances also varied, including differences in the number of children within the family and the forms of family and external support available to mothers.

The children similarly represented heterogeneous disability and health circumstances rather than a single diagnostic group. Reported conditions included intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, chromosomal conditions and other developmental or health-related conditions, with some children experiencing multiple or co-occurring conditions. This heterogeneity enabled the study to examine maternal reflections across differing caregiving circumstances rather than experiences associated with a single diagnostic category.

Given the small number of children within a single grade and school, participant characteristics are reported in aggregate rather than linked at the individual level. Combining specific maternal characteristics, such as age and occupation, with children's diagnoses, family composition and other personal circumstances could increase the possibility of deductive identification within the school community. Aggregate reporting was therefore adopted to provide sufficient contextual information for interpretation while preserving participant confidentiality.

Despite differences in individual circumstances, common patterns were evident in how mothers reflected on the ways raising a child with a disability had influenced their perspectives on parenting, child development, personal wellbeing, relationships and everyday life. Four interconnected themes were developed through the analysis: (1) deconstructing normality, (2) reframing caregiving through self-compassion, (3) redressing isolation through support-seeking, and (4) finding meaning in hardship. These themes should not be understood as sequential stages of maternal adaptation. Rather, they represent interconnected patterns of meaning evident across participants' retrospective reflections.

Theme 1: Deconstructing Normality

The first theme was a reconsideration by mothers of what 'normal' child development entailed and a challenge to traditional expectations of how children should develop and how mothers should parent. Several of the mothers reported that they had moved from comparing their child with others to recognising their child's own characteristics, preferences and pace of development. Participant 1 put it especially succinctly: "I no longer understand what 'normal' means. I realised there is no point in comparing oneself with others." Participant 10 similarly advised mothers to "understand your child's characteristics without comparing to others" and described learning "not to rush" but to allow her child to develop at their own pace. Participant 11's reflection extended this questioning beyond developmental comparison to conventional assumptions about how children should behave and develop. She reflected, "I realised how bound I was by common sense," and later emphasised that "your common sense is not universal." Her account reflects a shift from expecting the child to conform to predetermined assumptions towards reconsidering those assumptions in relation to the child's individual characteristics.

These accounts are significant because developmental comparison appeared elsewhere in mothers' narratives as an important part of recognising their children's differences. For some participants, early awareness that their child's development differed from siblings or same-aged children generated uncertainty, anxiety or urgency to obtain developmental support. The later questioning of "normality" therefore does not necessarily indicate that developmental expectations ceased to matter. Instead, mothers' retrospective accounts suggest a reorientation in how those expectations were interpreted. Developmental difference became less exclusively understood through comparison with conventional milestones and increasingly through attention to the individual child.

This finding is consistent with Kido's (2018) qualitative analysis of positive experiences of Japanese parents of children with autism spectrum disorder that challenged approaches that frame children's characteristics mainly as problems to be corrected or normalised. Kido argued that the recognition of children's characteristics as part of their individuality can shift the focus away from conformity to normative expectations onto the child. The

present findings contribute to this by showing how the interrogation of normality was also turned inwards: mothers reconsidered not only the expectations of their children but also the assumptions that had previously structured their own understandings of parenting and everyday life. For example, Participant 6 reported that she had let go of many of the “shoulds” and “musts” of motherhood and was therefore able to live in a way that felt more “true to myself.” These do not imply abandoning developmental goals or educational expectations. Instead, they argue that progress may need to be conceptualised in relation to the individual child’s trajectory rather than normative comparison per se. This difference is exemplified in Participant 8’s account of celebrating ‘every tiny achievement’ despite her child’s slow development. In this sense, deconstructing normality did not mean devaluing development, but rather rethinking the criteria by which development itself was recognised and valued.

Theme 2: Reframing Caregiving through Self-Compassion

The second theme reflected mothers’ redefinition of what responsible caregiving meant to them. Some mothers recognised their own physical and emotional needs as legitimate, rather than defining good motherhood in terms of constant self-sacrifice. Participant 1 said, “sleep when you can sleep and take good care of yourself.” Similarly, Participant 2 encouraged mothers to use available support so that “the mother can value her own life too.” Most explicitly, Participant 11 said, “Parents are human too; rather than trying to be a ‘good parent’, do what makes you happy.... Put yourself first; it’s okay to depend on others; ...don't overwork yourself.” These reflections become especially important when considering the wider demands represented in the participants’ accounts. Mothers reported challenges with healthcare and rehabilitation appointments, children’s behavioural or developmental needs, work schedules, limited personal time and uncertainty about future care. Self-compassion was thus not synonymous with withdrawal of caregiving responsibility. Rather, it reflected an acknowledgement of the limits of continued caregiving.

The findings are consistent with evidence that maternal wellbeing is a substantive concern among families raising children with disabilities in Japan. Yamaoka et al. (2016) found significantly greater psychological distress among mothers raising children with disabilities than among mothers whose children did not have disabilities. Their earlier carer study (87.3% were mothers) similarly found that 44.4% of carers of children with disabilities met the threshold for psychological distress, with low social support showing a particularly strong association with distress (Yamaoka et al., 2015). Porter and Loveland's (2019) integrative review of Japanese research on mothers of children with autism found that maternal stress cannot be attributed solely to children's diagnostic characteristics; rather, it was associated with both child- and parent-related factors, including child behaviour problems, low parenting efficacy, attachment difficulties and insufficient social support.

The current findings add another dimension to present literature. There is a large body of research on the prevalence and correlates of maternal distress. However, the mothers' reflections reveal how wellbeing itself can be reinterpreted through the caregiving experience. “It’s a blessing to live life liking myself just as I am,” Participant 3 said and also mentioned increased acceptance of her own limitations. Participant 7 also warned that raising a child with a disability was “by no means all fun” and mothers should be able to admit when experiences were painful rather than constantly pushing themselves. These stories position an acceptance of vulnerability and personal limitation not as failures of motherhood but as part of living with ongoing caregiving responsibilities in a sustainable way.

Theme 3: Redressing Isolation through Support-Seeking

The third theme was a move from conceptualising caregiving as an individual undertaking for mothers to the legitimacy and necessity of support-seeking. Participant 1 advised mothers not to “solve everything” themselves but to “consult and rely on many people.” Participant 3 stated very directly that “asking people for help is not something to be ashamed of.” Participant 2 reminded mothers not to “go it alone” in caring for their child, while Participant 9 specifically mentioned family and public welfare services. Participant 10 advised mothers to “call on supportive people/agencies without hesitation” and warned, “don't bottle it up alone.”

The support in these mothers' stories was multidimensional, not necessarily based on one relationship. Mothers mentioned spouses and relatives, other parents, teachers, health care professionals, public health nurses, developmental services, welfare agencies and community resources. This relationally sustained understanding of caregiving was captured in Participant 8's reflection that "we live supported by many people." Thus the finding is more than just receiving support. Some mothers said they were willing to lean more on others and that help-seeking was increasingly seen as a form of supportive interdependence, rather than a sign of personal failure.

This interpretation is strongly supported by previous research. Porter and Loveland (2019) identified insufficient social support as the most consistently reported factor associated with poorer psychological wellbeing across the Japanese studies included in their review. Similarly, Yamaoka et al. (2015) found a particularly strong association between low social support and psychological distress among caregivers of children with disabilities. Moriwaki et al. (2022) found among 1,190 Japanese mothers of children with cerebral palsy that formal support services were associated with reduced caregiving burden, with satisfaction with short-stay services showing a particularly strong association with lower burden. Together, these studies indicate that the resources surrounding mothers are consequential to wellbeing; caregiving difficulty cannot be understood solely as an individual mother's capacity to cope.

Theme 4: Finding Meaning in Hardship

The final theme captured mothers' reflections on valued experiences that had become visible through disability parenting, including gratitude, broadened perspectives, enriched relationships, authenticity, appreciation of children's growth and a renewed valuation of ordinary life. These reflections conveyed appreciation, learning and personal growth, but such positive meanings generally coexisted with continuing hardship and uncertainty. Participant 9 explicitly stated that raising her child was "full of hardships" and at the same time explained that learning, gathering information, and receiving help had "enriched my life." Participant 11 also viewed her children as her "greatest life teachers" who taught her that "just being alive is amazing," and that "painful times still exist." Pely (2025), through a phenomenological study, found that parents developed deeper empathy, stronger relationships, and better coping skills alongside the hardships of caring for their children with disabilities. Similarly, Böttcher and Dammeyer (2025) found that parents of children with cerebral palsy have developed complex meta-strategies and coping skills through both failed and successful negotiations to secure welfare services for their children.

Participant 5 admitted to ongoing concerns but stressed the need to enjoy the moment and live each day happily. Participant 8 talked about celebrating small developmental achievements and focusing on health and enjoyment in family life. "I have become more attentive to people who seemed vulnerable and more appreciative of those who gave support", according to Participant 4. Participant 6 related parenting to becoming more authentic and expressed gratitude for a life that was not conventionally 'normal'. For some mothers, hardship remained a clear presence in the same reflection. For example, Participant 7 spoke of the hard times of parenting and the suffering that comes from the differences between reality and ideals but also encouraged mothers to move forward slowly and naturally with their children. Participant 11 also spoke about how ongoing pain brought greater appreciation and learning. Thus, meaning-making was not necessarily the end point of a linear journey from distress to acceptance. Instead, mothers' retrospective reflections highlighted how ongoing difficulties could co-exist with experiences that they considered valuable or meaningful.

Synthesis and Implications

The findings suggest that mothers' reflections on disability parenting extended beyond descriptions of caregiving burden and coping. Across the four themes, participants described reconsidering conventional assumptions about child development, recognising the importance of their own wellbeing, becoming more willing to rely on others, and deriving new meanings from everyday experiences with their children. These perspectives did not replace continuing hardship, uncertainty or caregiving demands. Rather, they coexisted with them, illustrating that maternal experiences of disability parenting are complex, relational and shaped by both personal reflection and the support structures surrounding families.

Importantly, the mothers' accounts suggest the limitations of interpreting disability parenting primarily in terms of either hardship or positive adaptation. Finding meaning did not require participants to portray their experiences as inherently positive or to suggest that difficulties had been overcome. Instead, appreciation of their children's development, gratitude, personal learning, enriched relationships and a greater valuing of everyday life could coexist with continuing challenges and uncertainty. This implies the importance of understanding maternal wellbeing and adaptation without treating burden, coping, acceptance and positive meaning as mutually exclusive or necessarily sequential experiences.

These findings also have implications for how mothers raising children with disabilities are supported. Support should neither position mothers predominantly in terms of burden and vulnerability nor presume that successful adaptation requires resilience, acceptance or personal growth. Rather, mothers should have opportunities to acknowledge difficulties without being defined by them, to attend to their own wellbeing without this being construed as incompatible with good motherhood, and to seek and receive support without reliance on others being regarded as an inability to cope. Such an approach recognises maternal wellbeing and supportive interdependence as integral dimensions of caregiving, recognising that supporting the mother and supporting the child are interconnected rather than separate concerns.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted in relation to the study's bounded recruitment context. Although participants met predetermined eligibility criteria concerning maternal caregiving, the child's age and co-residence, access to potential participants was ultimately facilitated through mothers of third-grade children attending one elementary special support school. The restriction to this grade resulted from the distribution procedure determined by the participating school rather than from an additional eligibility criterion established by the researchers. Participation was voluntary and self-selected among mothers who received the study materials. Consequently, mothers who participated may have differed from non-participants in their caregiving circumstances, available time, willingness to provide written reflections or perspectives on disability parenting.

The use of written interviews also shaped the nature of the data generated. Although the format enabled mothers to provide reflections privately and at a time convenient to them, it did not permit the researchers to seek clarification or probe participants' responses in the way that synchronous qualitative interviews might have allowed. The findings should therefore be understood as interpretations developed from the written accounts participants chose to provide rather than as exhaustive representations of their caregiving experiences.

The findings are not intended to represent Japanese mothers of children with disabilities as a homogeneous population, nor should the four themes be interpreted as stages that mothers necessarily experience. Rather, they provide contextually situated insights into how this group of mothers made sense of disability parenting. Future research involving mothers recruited across multiple schools, children's age groups and differing family circumstances could examine how these perspectives are expressed within other caregiving contexts.

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