



## The Experiences of Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Searching for Balance Between Work and Family Life

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### Abstract

It is undeniable that mothers primarily undertake the daily life needs, care, and education processes of their children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Working mothers fulfill their children's responsibilities as well as other responsibilities in family life. Working mothers' ability to establish a balance between their family lives, with all the responsibilities this includes, and work life significantly affects their ability to continue their lives. This study aims to investigate the working mothers' experiences in maintaining balance between their work and family lives. This research is based on phenomenological design, which is a qualitative research method.

Mothers' experiences of balancing work and family life are a phenomenon that needs to be clarified. Reflecting on this phenomenon through mothers' discourses will reveal 'what' and 'how' they experience this process. The participants of the study are five working mothers of children with ASD who are trained in special education and rehabilitation centers in the central districts of Gaziantep. Research data was obtained using a semi-structured interview technique. The data was analyzed using the categories developed based on pre determined codes in the content analysis. The results of the study show that working mothers of children with ASD had a pessimistic perception of their work and family life experiences, where they experienced emotional confusion, and felt they had insufficient support. Because parents of children with ASD are not informed about their legal rights, they cannot benefit from these rights both in the private and the public sector. Evaluation of the research findings suggests training can be offered to working mothers, in learning about and defending their legal rights, and to managers in the institutions that deal with these parents' legal rights applications.

### Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder  
Working mother  
Balance  
Types of balance  
Phenomenology

### Article Info

Received: 06.03.2021  
Accepted: 10.10.2022  
Online Published: 10.28.2022

DOI: 10.15390/EB.2022.10970

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## Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a group of disorders with an onset typically occurring during preschool years and characterized by difficulties with social communication and social interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns in behaviors, interests, and activities (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; Lord, Elsabbagh, Baird, & Veenstra-Vanderweele, 2018). This spectrum creates difficulties in daily life because it affects the development and behavior of the child. It is known that this situation greatly affects not only the child but also the family (Nealy, O'Hare, Powers, & Swick, 2012; Üstüner-Top, 2009; Watt & Wagner, 2013).

As ASD affects the development of the child and causes difficulties in daily routines, studies have looked at the effect of the psychological states/experiences of the family during and after diagnosis (Güleç-Aslan, Cihan, & Altın, 2014; Selimoğlu, Özdemir, Töret, & Özkubat, 2013), perceptions of social support (Hall & Graff, 2011), the level of depression and anxiety in families (Akoğlu, Şahin, & Çakmak, 2018), social life relationships (Hall & Graff, 2011; Nealy et al., 2012), managing personal/work life (Montes & Halterman, 2008), communication within the family (Vardarcı, 2011), socialization (Hall & Graff, 2011), and the process of adaptation with the spouse (Akoğlu et al., 2018; Yassıbaş, 2015).

Families need to learn how to cope with these situations and regulate their life balance by making various adjustments in their lives (Brown, 2014; Weiss, 2002). It is important for parents to maintain a balance between their work and family lives (Brown, 2014). Parents are often observed to be preoccupied with their work and family life responsibilities while ignoring their interactions with their social environment (Cavkaytar, Batu, & Cetin, 2008; Özkubat, Özdemir, Gürel-Selimoğlu, & Töret, 2014). In addition to the responsibilities of the families, studies have also looked at their social communication with their environment and the support they receive to carry out their responsibilities (Stefanidis & Strogilos, 2020). While parents with typically developing children have difficulty in balancing changes in work and family life (Kılıç & Öztürk, 2014), parents of children with ASD have more difficulty in achieving this balance (Freedman, Litchfield, & Warfield, 1995; Montes & Halterman, 2008; Watt & Wagner, 2013).

It is primarily mothers who take on the various responsibilities such as education, care, and health of their children (Brown & Clark, 2017; Nealy et al., 2012). In addition to these responsibilities, mothers often want an active working life, both to contribute to the family economy and to progress in their professional careers (Bruns & Schrey, 2012; Ejiri & Matsuzawa, 2019). However, many mothers have difficulties in maintaining work-life balance. Among the factors that influence work and family life (Stewart, 2013) are taking on the responsibility of childcare alone (Brown & Clark, 2017) and lack of family support (Major, Klein, & Ehrhart, 2002), employers' expectations (Brown & Sumner, 2012), inflexibility of working hours (Brown, 2014), and being unable to work in the positions they want (Watt & Wagner, 2013). Mothers are conflicted when there is inconsistency between their working conditions, professional career expectations, and responsibilities (Brown, 2014). That conflict often leads to burnout, depression, stress, and hopelessness (Avşaroğlu & Gilik, 2017; Brown, 2014; Shearn & Todd, 2000). Although mothers with children with ASD state that their work is necessary for their well-being and to pay their children's education expenses (McCabe, 2010), it may cause them to experience difficulty in fulfilling their work life responsibilities, which leads them to prefer less demanding or part-time positions (Baker & Drapela, 2010; Freedman et al., 1995; Lewis, Kagan, & Heaton, 2000). Accordingly, they put their professional careers in the background to concentrate on their responsibilities as mothers of children with ASD (McCabe, 2010). Later they may give up their work (Bruns & Schrey, 2012; Üstüner-Top, 2009). This rejection of work is not voluntary, but arises as a result of the lack of support they experience in the care and education of their children (Kahraman & Çetin, 2015; Lewis et al., 2000; Navot, Jorgenson, VanderStoep, Toth, & Webb, 2016; Parish, 2006; Shearn & Todd, 2000). To avoid the pressure to give up work, mothers need to maintain balance between their work and family lives. It is possible that the needs of mothers to achieve this balance can be met with support offered by people in their social environments. Although such support is a facilitator in their lives, it can contribute to their

emotional-social processes (Bromley, Hare, Davison, & Emerson, 2004; Coşkun & Akkaş, 2009; Tehee, Honan, & Hevey, 2009) and create a positive effect on both work and family life commitment levels (Hodgetts, McConnell, & Zwaigenbaum, 2014; Porterfield, 2002; Stefanidis & Strogilos, 2020).

Work and daily life balance can be defined as allocating sufficient time to fulfil responsibilities at home and work (Guest, 2002) and has a physical and psychological aspect in the stability of the body and mind. People's lifestyles, roles, and activities affect balance processes and their perception of balance depends on the degree to which their needs are met (Matuska, 2012). There are various models of work-life balance designed according to the types of balance people establish. Guest (2002)'s balance model proposes four types of balance: instrumental balance, compensational balance, conflictual balance, and segmentational balance (Guest, 2002; Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2010). Instrumental balance is where an individual facilitates one success in other spheres; with compensational balance, the individual uses one sphere to make up for what is lacking in other spaces; in conflictual balance, personal and professional spheres clash in an antagonistic way (Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2010). In designing the current research model, interdisciplinary studies dealing with the issue of balance between work and private life were also taken as a basis. As Ashforth (2000) states, the concept of balance is relative. Opinions and perceptions about maintaining balance may differ from one person to another. As Ashforth, (2000), Keene and Quadagno (2004), and Hacıfazlıoğlu (2010) state, finding a harmonious balance in an individual's life may differ from one person to another. It is also quite complex and changes can occur in the process. In this context, Gmelch (2000) defines the process in which an ideal balance is achieved as "instrumental balance". However, any change in our life leads to changes or even deterioration in balance harmony. Therefore, the interaction between the transition from instrumental to compensational balance stands out. Clark (2000), who has the same point of view as Gmelch (2000), while discussing the lives of individuals between work and family axes according to the family border theory, draws attention to the existence of a separate but synergetic relationship in both contexts. In this struggle, individuals can feel they face difficult conditions that are hard to get out of while continuing their search for balance. At this point, "conflictual" balance may come to the fore and the individual finds himself/herself in conflicts that may affect their performance and well-being in work and family life. In conflictual balance, negative relationships and exhausting conflicts between work and family life come to the fore. In the segmentational balance model, although there is no connection to balance between work and family, individuals are not even aware of the fact that they are disconnected from their private lives and even from themselves due to their difficulties with workload.

There are a limited number of studies in the literature focusing on the work and family life balance of mothers of children with ASD. In one study, Parish (2006) conducted a focus group interview with two groups in a low socio-economic region to examine the work-life balance and experiences of working mothers who have adolescent children with developmental disabilities. The mothers stated that they faced great difficulties in balancing their work and care responsibilities due to the rapid decline in support services when their children reached puberty. In addition, the mothers participating in the study reported that they were responsible for taking care of their children and were not supported by their spouses. Stein, Foran, and Cermak (2011) states that establishing a work-life balance can be difficult for many, while parents of children affected by disability face more difficulties in establishing this balance. It has been emphasized that parents of individuals with ASD may encounter this risk more since the frequency of diagnosis is increasing. In addition to the problems experienced by parents in achieving a good work-life balance, they may also experience psychological and physical health problems. Parents may change their lifestyles to cope with the growing problems and to restore balance. Hodgetts et al. (2014) examined the effect of ASD support services on mothers' professional balance and participation in leisure time activities. The research found that the discontinuation of support services causes mothers to become unemployed, disrupts their participation in leisure activities, and causes them to be unable to take part in their chosen professions. In addition, they experience processes of professional instability and self-sacrifice because of the time they spend finding and participating in professional services for their children. According to a study by Güleç-Aslan et al. (2014), mothers feel that their whole lives are affected because they take on the responsibilities of their child with ASD,

which limits their social lives. In a study by Navot et al. (2016), which explored family planning and visions of families with children with ASD, mothers stated that the responsibility of their children is solely on themselves, since their spouses had to work, causing them to take breaks from work for certain periods. Sitimin, Fikry, Ismail, and Hussein (2017) examines work-family roles and the ways in which conflict can be eliminated from the lenses of working parents of children with ASD. The researchers note that it is difficult for parents to maintain balance between their work and family roles. The findings of the study suggest what parents need to reduce conflict as well as the kinds of support they require. Parents stated that they need a kindergarten that accepts children with ASD along with support from their employers.

A review of the literature shows that there are limited numbers of studies outside Turkey (Baker & Drapela, 2010; Hodgetts et al., 2014; Navot et al., 2016; Parish, 2006; Stein et al., 2011; Sitimin et al., 2017), while there are almost no studies focusing on mothers of children with ASD and experiences of work and family life balance (Bilgin & Küçük, 2010; Güleç-Aslan et al., 2014; Yassıbaş, 2015) in Turkey. This study investigates the experiences of mothers in trying to maintain balance between their work and family lives as parents of children with ASD. The data was collected from parents whose children receive education in special education and rehabilitation centers. The aim of this study is to examine the experiences of working mothers of children with ASD in maintaining a balance between their work and family lives. Within this general purpose, the study sought to answer the following question: "What are the experiences of working mothers of children with ASD in maintaining the four types of balance (instrumental, compensational, conflictual, and segmentational) between their work and family lives?" The findings and suggestions of this research are expected to contribute to the field of special education, employers, colleagues, and other working parents of children with ASD to understand the process as well as establishing support mechanisms.

## Method

### *Research Design*

This study uses phenomenological design in order to focus on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group with the aim of arriving at a description of the nature of the particular (Creswell, 2014). The experiences of individuals and groups experiencing a shared phenomenon is the focus of phenomenological design (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Mothers' experiences in maintaining a balance between their work and family lives is investigated within the context of work, family, and social lives.

### *Participants*

The participants of the study are five working mothers with children with ASD who are trained in special education and rehabilitation centers in the central districts of Gaziantep. "Criterion Sampling", which is a purposeful sampling strategy, was used (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Researchers visited special education centers and selected participants [mothers] based on teachers' references. The following criteria was used; a) Mothers of children with ASD aged between 0 and 6 years; b) Mothers working in the public or private sector or self-employed. Seven mothers met this criterion. Five mothers volunteered to contribute to the study after being informed of the purpose and what was expected from them during the course of the research in initial interviews. Research data was obtained using a semi-structured interview and pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the mothers and their children. The demographic profile of the mothers and their children is given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of the Mothers and their Children

Participants		Mothers			Children		
Pseudonyms	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation	Age	Gender	Number of Siblings
Ayşe	38	Married	Bachelors	Teacher	6	Male	0
Begüm	35	Married	Bachelors	Computer Programmer	4	Male	0
Ceyda	40	Married	Bachelors	Officer		Male	1
Deren	42	Married	Masters	Academician	4	Male	1
Ezgi	37	Single	Bachelors	Nurse	4	Female	0

The participant mothers were between the ages of 35 and 42, considered middle aged. The mothers are university graduates and working in different positions. It was determined that only one of the mothers (Begüm) quit her job and continued to work self-employed. Four of the mothers are married and one is single. Four of the children of the mothers participating in the study with ASD are boys and one is a girl. The children with ASD are between the ages of three and six. Three of the children do not have siblings and two of them have one sibling.

#### *Data Collection Tool*

One data collection technique in phenomenological design is interviewing from the perspective of those who have the experience (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to obtain in-depth information about work and family life balance. This technique was preferred as it provides flexibility in the interview process with the participants (Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2014). The researchers prepared 11 questions to collect in-depth information about the subject. These questions were sent to three experts in the fields of Special Education and Educational Sciences working on special education and balance, and expert opinion was obtained. According to expert opinion, 8 interview questions were selected. A pilot interview was conducted with one mother to determine the clarity and comprehensibility of the questions. This confirmed that the questions were clear and comprehensible. The questions included, “As a working mother of a child with ASD, how do you balance your home-work life?”, “What kind of support did you need in order to maintain balance between family, friends and work life?”, “Who supported you the most?”. The interview process was initiated with the approval of Hasan Kalyoncu University, Institutional Review Board (-804.01-E2005140016).

#### *Data Collection Process*

The researchers visited special education and rehabilitation centers and held initial conversations in order to select possible mothers of children with ASD. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study in these initial interviews. They were also informed that all the interviews would be recorded and the transcriptions would be shared with an expert in the validation process. They were also informed about the safeguards of the process, confirming that the recordings will not be share with other individuals or institutions. The participants were mothers who volunteered as a result of the initial interviews. Mothers were informed that pseudonyms would be used to keep their identity confidential and that they could withdraw at any stage. Mothers were informed about the participation requirements and safeguards, and asked to certify their informed consent. Interview appointments were arranged and conducted at the time and location of the mothers’ choice. Permission to record the interview after giving the necessary information about the research was taken from the mothers. Table 2 presents the interview process information.

**Table 2.** Information about the Process of the Interviews with Participants

Pseudonyms	Interview Date	Interview Time	Duration of the Interview	Recording Type	Interview Place
Deren	09.04.2019	13:00	65:00	Recording	Interview Room
Ayşe	10.04.2019	11:00	45:00	Recording	Interview Room
Begüm	12.04.2019	14:00	45:00	Recording	Counselling Room
Ceyda	20.04.2019	17:00	15:00	Recording	Interview Room
Ezgi	22.04.2019	18:00	105:00	Recording	Interview Room

As Table 2 shows, the duration of the interviews ranged from a minimum of 15 minutes to a maximum of 105 minutes. A total of 275 minutes were recorded. Interviews were held in the consultation rooms located in special education and rehabilitation centers between April 10-24, 2019. The interview room in the special education center is rectangular and contains one table and two sofas. The counselling room is square and contains one table, three sofas, and an armchair. There is also a TV screen on the wall.

#### *Data Analysis*

Each interview was transcribed word for word at the end of the data collection process, producing 78 pages of transcriptions. An expert in special education was asked to compare the transcriptions with the original recordings to ensure there was no missing data. The data was analyzed using categories determined based on codings. Preparing a list of codes prior to analysis is possible when there is a theoretical and conceptual framework. These codings can be themes as well as categories under themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

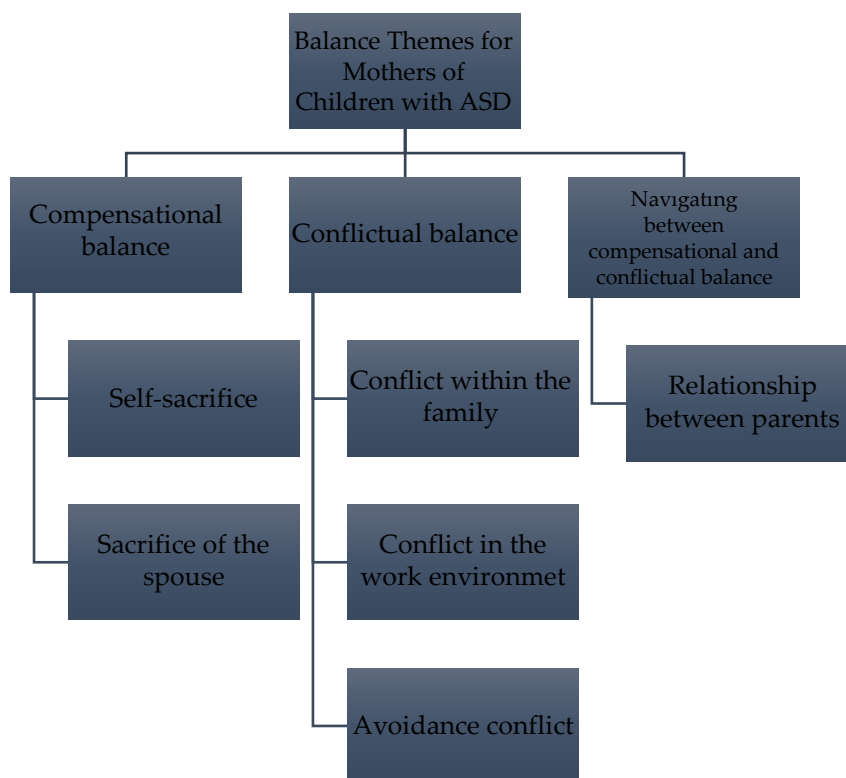
The researchers coded each interview and recorded the information in tables. Challenges encountered by mothers and the strategies used to overcome these challenges were used as a basis in determining the codes. These codes were categorized based on the common qualities. In the final phase, categories were analyzed in depth in conjunction with instrumental balance, compensational balance, conflicting balance, and segmentational balance (Guest, 2002; Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2010). In line with Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012), themes determined in earlier studies on balance were used as a reference in the analysis of the qualitative data. The analysis reveals the challenges the mothers encountered in maintaining balance between their home and work lives. None of them appear to fall into the category of segmentational balance or instrumental balance as they used no words or expressions that align with this category. For this reason, compensational balance and the conflicting balance were the two main themes determined in this study. In the final phase of the analysis, the following three themes were determined which is unique to this study: *“Compensational Balance, Conflicting Balance, and The Search for Balance Between Compensational and Conflicting”* (presented in Figure 1).

### ***Validity, Transferability, and Confirmability***

Participants were asked to review and confirm the transcripts of their interview in order to maintain validity while minimizing bias. In this way participants were given the opportunity to check whether the results confirm what they said during the interviews. Follow up phone interviews were also held with the mothers. They were asked whether they wanted to add any other details they may have previously missed. Selected words and sentences were used in order to maintain transferability. Confirmability was done through the confirmation received from the experts. Experts trained in qualitative analysis methods were consulted. Confirmation analysis was conducted on graduate students of counselling and psychological guidance and special education using the Miles and Huberman (1994) formulation:  $(\text{Agreement})/(\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement}) \times 100$ . Agreement was determined when the researchers' and experts' codings matched. Differences in the coding patterns were accepted as disagreement. As a follow up, the researchers compared the coding patterns and found 87% agreement, which can be accepted as a sign of reliability.

### **Findings**

The findings of the research consist of three themes and sub-themes, based on Guest (2002)'s work-life balance model. Figure 1 shows the themes and sub-themes that make up the findings.



**Figure 1.** Balance Themes for Mothers of Children with ASD

Figure 1 shows that the majority of mothers' of children with ASD views on maintaining balance between their work and family lives fall into the categories of "compensational balance" and "conflictual balance". Analysis of the data obtained from the mothers reveals a new theme: "*search for balance between compensational and conflictual*", which emerged in addition to the themes "compensational balance" and "conflictual balance",

### **Theme 1: Compensational Balance**

All the mothers involved in the research seem to maintain compensational balance. Under this theme, mothers' views were categorized under the sub-themes of "self-sacrifice and sacrifice of the spouse". Mothers mostly stated that they had experiences which led to self-sacrifice due to time constraints and lack of personal time such as giving up hobbies and not being able to spend time with their spouse. Although there were times mothers mentioned being engaged in their own personal activities as well as spending time with their spouse and friends, the frequency was insignificant.

#### **Self-sacrifice**

The participants stated that the few hours that their children spent at school were valuable moments where they could breathe. However, they stated that they had the opportunity to meet their basic needs, did their household works along with their own needs during these periods. The mother Ezgi, who works an extremely busy schedule as a nurse, explained *"the workplace is a rest place for me, I'm grateful for my friends"*. This was echoed in the voices of two of the other mothers. Academician Deren on the other hand, underlines her lack of motivation to go into faculty. She shared her feelings of disadvantage and unhappiness caused by her colleagues' negative attitude, even though she held the legal right as the mother of a child with ASD. Deren expresses her feelings as *"I don't want to go to the faculty... All of my steps regarding the work schedule is tracked by my colleagues... Even though my administrator supports me, I feel lonely and stressed..."*.

Mothers of children with ASD appear to make sacrifices in social lives by allocating more effort to their work, rather than finding opportunities for their social lives when compared to other mothers. Civil servant Ceyda, expressed how she missed the times she spent with her friends, saying "I miss strolling, sitting and drinking coffee with my friends". Teacher Ayşe said *"we are not doing anything, we are just trying to do something for Ahmet"*, highlighting one of the main problems encountered by families of children with ASD, which is *"sacrificing yourself"*. Deren illustrates the ways in which she maintained balance between her work and family life through the sacrifices she has made, saying *"I worked very hard so that my employers could not criticize my performance. For this reason, I used to come to work late and leave early..."*

During the interviews, all the mothers emphasized the importance of not compensating for themselves. Computer programmer Begüm explained the difficulties she has in this challenging the process and how she misses the good old days and routines with these words: *"In the past, I used to find time to go to the cinema, hairdresser, and allocate time for my social life. But now I have no time, I feel like I have become distant from my own self. My only focus has become Ayşe... I miss my coffee [times] and [reading] my books"*.

#### **Sacrifice of the Spouse**

Some mothers' views fall under the sub theme of sacrifice of spouse. Mothers stated that they could not find time to spend with their spouse due to the demanding work required to take care of their children, which may lead them to the point of sacrificing their marriage. The following excerpt from Deren reveals how children become a priority for mothers and how they sacrifice their own well being in order to make positive changes in the lives of their children: *"I missed strolling, drinking tea, and going to the movies with my husband. I sacrificed not only my own self but also my husband. The only thing we both want is for our child to be healthy"*. This shows how it is very challenging to maintain balance between work and family lives when sacrificing a lot as a spouse.



### **Theme 2: Conflictual Balance**

All the mothers appeared to be situated in the conflictual balance category. Interviews showed that mothers' experiences were in difficulty in the distribution of work, difficulty in sharing duties, inability to use legal rights, conflict with the institution, conflict with the work environment, and conflict with the close environment with, most often, the tendency to avoid conflict. Mothers feel intense conflict between home and work, social life and work, as well as economic concerns and work related issues. Ayşe explains her conflict between work and life in these words: *"If I take care of the house, I cannot take care of my work; if I take care of my work, I cannot take care of the house; I am a teacher, I also have responsibilities..."* Ceyda illustrates the ways in which she experiences conflict between her work and home in the following words: *"I can never think of resigning from my job; we wouldn't be able to survive. If I don't work... I have payments... [we will be in trouble]"*. Working is a necessity for her to meet her financial needs. On the other hand, Deren states that *"I get along well with everyone, I need not to leave work..."*. She appears to avoid conflict in maintaining balance between her work and family lives as she feels the strong need to focus on her well being. The sub-themes of "Conflict within the family, conflict within the work environment, and avoidance of conflict", which are categorized under the theme of conflictual balance, are included in the following sections of the research.

#### **Conflict within the Family**

The mothers who participated in the study stated that they experienced various emotional reactions after their children were diagnosed with ASD. They emphasized that these emotional reactions caused conflict within the family. While some mothers and fathers dealt with this challenging process through mutual support, others experienced conflict. Ezgi said, *"Her father left us after the diagnosis. I went through the process alone. He left home saying, 'I'm not going to live with your ... [inappropriate word] daughter!"*. Deren on the other hand said, *"my husband immediately accepted the process. I was crying day and night. He always supported me, but I made the process more difficult by questioning why, why [it happened to us] all the time"*, and stated that although she received support from her husband during the diagnosis process, it was her own inability to accept the process led to conflict.

When grandparents hear that their grandchildren have been diagnosed with ASD, their first reaction is one of shock and then they begin to act overprotectively. What is emphasized by the mothers is that the grandparents either accept the situation or deny it and start neglecting their grandchildren. Ezgi shares her experience of how older members of the family wanted to hide her child due to embarrassment: *"When my grandmother passed away, they asked me not to bring my child [to the house]... [and they implied] ... what they would do if everyone saw her in the condition?"*. Ayşe, on the other hand, reveals the inability of some grandparents to deal with the process and how they can move the situation to an extreme level: *"Even though my family lived in another city, they came to help us every weekend. While I was able to relieve some of the burden, their behaviors showed that they pity her as if there is nothing they can do [to help her progress], which resulted in accepting all of her demands and spoiling her all the time."*

#### **Conflict in the Work Environment**

Mothers emphasized the lack of support provided by the government in their children's education and their need to work to support them with private lessons. They also asserted that they encountered challenges, such as unsupportive attitudes of their colleagues and the overlap of work and school start times, leading them to be unable to use their legal rights. Deren said, *"my colleagues said there is nothing wrong with this child, you are just trying to get a diagnosis for your child. Starting work at a later time is a problem for me...our family does not live with us"*, expressing the problems they experience in the business environment. Begüm, a computer programmer, expressed this in the following way:

*I was working harder on everything so that I wouldn't be criticized. I was arriving at work late and leaving early... [To compensate for this] I worked hard and tried very hard not to get in the way of anyone, but people don't take your contributions into consideration; instead they evaluate your performance based on the work hours. My boss couldn't stand the pressure either, and eventually he also started to complain... So I quit my job and moved to self-employment.*

She stated that her colleagues started to keep track of her working hours while putting pressure on her boss, who, while not concerned about her arrival time, began to feel uncomfortable due to the pressure her colleagues were putting on him, and this eventually led her to leave her job. Experiences show that the mothers could not benefit from their legal rights due to problems in the working culture, which caused them to leave their positions despite being willing to continue.

#### ***Avoidance of Conflict***

Mothers emphasized that the process became so challenging that they struggled to carry the heavy burden and this led them to use avoidance strategies, staying away from the situation whilst having a smooth transition to the process with the minimum amount of stress. First, they stated that they experienced being unable to take part in socializing. The following words from Begüm mirror the difficulties socializing experienced by families of children with ASD:

*My co-workers started to compare everything with me. My job, my husband, my child, and myself. I didn't want to be in the same environment anymore. I decided to quit my job in order not to compensate from my own self.*

Begüm not only avoided socializing with her colleagues outside of work but also tried to protect herself in the work environment. Emotional dilemmas experienced by Begüm may have led her to interpret the difficulties in the work environment differently. While making sense of this challenging process, she felt as if she was under pressure. For this reason, she stated that she continued her work life by working self-employed from home in order to avoid conflict. While mothers of children with ASD initially avoid conflict, eventually it may cause them to remove themselves from work-related settings.

#### ***Theme 3: Navigating Between Compensational and Conflictual Balance***

Mothers of children with ASD experience rapidly changing lives when their child's disability is diagnosed. While some mothers have a smooth transition to the new way of life it brings, some are affected in a negative way. While some of the mothers sacrifice, some experience conflict. This shows that mothers are stuck between two types of balance, searching for balance between them.

Two of the interviewed mothers appeared to maintain balance between their work and family lives keeping them as two independent spheres. Ezgi stated, "As a working mother, I forget about my job and focus on my daughter when I come home to ensure my work-home life balance..." Begüm, who left her job and began working from home due to lack of support at work, was still unable to balance work and family life. She revealed the reasons why she left her job as follows: "My colleagues and I decided not to get together outside work... In this way, we avoided any potential harm by not seeing each other. They stated that they realised that they used these conversations against me. This caused me to feel disappointed."

The above anecdote shared by Begüm was echoed in the voices of the other mothers in social contexts. Although it is important for children with typical development and children with ASD and their mothers to interact in social settings as a way of enabling their integration into society, occasional dialogues comparing mothers and their children can hurt not only the child with ASD but also the mother. Although Begüm's decision to keep her distance from her friends seemed like a short-term solution, she realized the long-term negative impact and began meeting with them again. As she reflects: "My child seemed to realise my approach removing us from social settings; he behaved hyperactively at each of those meetings. I started to increase the frequency of the meetings with his cousins while shortening the duration of time. I was happy to see him laugh."

### ***Relationship between Parents***

Conflict avoidance, which is discussed under the theme of conflictual balance, appeared to be used by some spouses as a strategy in the search for balance. Ayşe reveals the difficulty of being the parent of a child with ASD as follows: *“My husband and I avoid eye contact. It hurts us to talk about our son, Ahmet. Even if we get through this process, our eyes still fill with tears when we see each other...”*

While parents are expected to take an active role as solution partners in the development process of children with ASD, the dilemma experienced by Ayşe puts herself and her husband in a vicious circle that they cannot get out of. In this process, her spouse Mehmet decided to switch to night-shift work in order to create a system in which they could rotate roles to care for their children. They visit their families who live in a village at the weekends so that they can provide Ahmet with a healthy environment where he can move freely as well as enjoy the quality family time. The positive experiences Ahmet had while interacting with his cousins are conveyed with these words: *“When Ahmet is in the village, he starts making constant eye contact, smiles and laughs... The nature, no rules, just freedom and love. Ahmet loves such environments. If he is happy, we are happy too.”* This statement reflects the benefits of spouses maintaining communication and sharing based on a “child-oriented” approach.

In summary, mothers of children with ASD do not use expressions that indicate the use of compensational balance in maintaining work and family balance. Mothers revealed how they navigate between compensational and conflictual balance. Mothers sacrifice their own lives for the sake of supporting their children in their developmental process. In this context, mothers appear to maintain balance based on "compensational balance" while conflicting balance in certain situations.

## **Discussion**

This study focuses on the ways in which mothers of children with ASD maintain balance between their work and family lives. It reveals that mothers did not exhibit a single type of balance but seem to use two or more types of balance at the same time. In addition, it was observed that all the mothers experience difficulties in maintaining balance between work and family. All of the mothers who participated in the study stated that they continued working due to their economic situation. This finding seems to differ from studies that find mothers resign from their jobs to meet the needs of their children (Brown, 2014; McCabe, 2010).

In the first theme, mothers stated that they maintain balance through self-sacrifice. One study stated that mothers felt responsible for social support and health and had difficulty in finding balance through compensation (Gill & Liamputtong, 2013). Cavkaytar et al. (2008) state that mothers limit their relationships with their friends and other social circles, they cannot spend time together as a family, they do not have a normal family life, and they devote their lives to their children with special needs. Hodgetts et al. (2014) point out that working mothers tend to have difficulty in establishing a work-life balance and thus self-sacrifice due to their participation in leisure activities and not being able to spare time for themselves.

Our study found that mothers take on their children's responsibilities more whereas fathers and the individuals around them cannot provide satisfactory support. This affects both the working and social lives of the mothers. Güleç Aslan et al. (2014), Brown and Clark (2017), and Parish (2006) found that mothers have more responsibility in the care of their children when compared to fathers while they receive almost no support from their spouses, putting their children in the focus of how they shape their lives.

Our study shows that mothers use their economic opportunities as much as they can in order to provide a high level of education for their children. Our research findings show that one of the mothers gave up her full-time work and began working from home due to the problems she encountered at work, and another mother could not give up her work due to her child's education expenses and debts, although she also had to spend more time with her child. This finding is similar to McCabe (2010), who emphasizes that mothers switch to jobs with more flexible working hours due to their children's disability. According to Hodgetts et al. (2014), working mothers have difficulties maintaining a professional balance and make sacrifices in their own work, which relates to their inability to work in chosen professions as well as their limited access to professional educational services for their children. In addition, our results appear to align with the related literature on mothers with ASD revealing the challenges encountered in maintaining work and family life balance, which highlights the universality of the problem (Baker & Drapela, 2010; Hodgetts et al., 2014; Navot et al., 2016; Parish, 2006; Stein et al., 2011).

In the second theme, mothers shared the difficulties they faced in finding time to meet with their spouses and friends, and indicate their eagerness to spend time with their spouses and friends as well as time on their own. What is evident in the stories is that these mothers found they have few people left in their social lives, leading to limited communication. Özkubat et al. (2014) also refers to the limited number of people in mothers' social circle and the lack of communication in their relations with their spouses and close friends.

It has been determined that mothers shoulder all the responsibilities of their children with ASD, and this leads to them not having spare time for themselves and their social lives while compensating from their own time, which eventually leads to anxiety and stress. Overloaded parental responsibilities appear to cause high levels of stress, anxiety, etc., in working mothers of children with ASD, which can cause various psychological disorders as well as hypertension, diabetes, etc. (Stein et al., 2011). This appears to support our results related to the stress experienced by the working mothers as a result of carrying out their responsibilities.

Ezgi stated that she had problems with her husband after the ASD diagnosis and that they experienced conflict within the family, triggered by an inappropriate expression used by the father toward his child. This situation caused a hostile setting both at home and work. She explains how this led her to leave her husband and change her life. In their study, Yassıbaş and Çolak (2019) also show that mothers' can result to ending their marriage due to the disputes and the discussions that emerged.

Mothers' feelings of being discriminated at work as well as lack of support from their colleagues along with personal sacrifices lead them to being involved in conflicting situations with their colleagues, which makes the struggle to maintain work-life balance more difficult. It has been found that mothers either had to continue their work and experience conflicts with their managers or continue to switch to a flexible path of working at home. This seems to align with the study conducted by Hodgetts et al. (2014), which reveals the ways in which various variables disrupt the work-life balance while leading mothers to sacrifice their private lives. In addition, this also correlates with a study revealing how mothers of children with ASD quit their job for adjustment and start working part time as well as the ones who continue to work have problems with their managers and colleagues (Yassıbaş, 2015).

Working mothers stated that when there is support, they feel more comfortable and happy both in their home-living spaces and in their work lives. In addition, it has been revealed that the support given by employers and colleagues in work life reduces the workload of working mothers, and they describe their workplaces as "resting facilities". This finding was reported by Freedman et al. (1995), who had similar results that parents see the workplace not only as a financial reward but also as a psychological satisfaction and a break.

Mothers stated that they questioned and felt guilty even while using their legal rights because of their colleagues' negative attitudes. Ünsal and Öksüz (2018), in their study examining parents' views on the inclusion practices of children with ASD, stated that some problems still cannot be overcome in practice in spite of existing legal rules. This aligns with the experiences of the working mothers in our study, who face various problems when they want to use their given rights or demand them from their companies. The mothers emphasized the importance of support they receive from their employers and colleagues in finding balance. Sitimin et al. (2017) also included in their research that a daycare center that accepts a child with ASD and employers' support is needed to reduce work-family conflicts.

Mothers stated that they have established their work and family life balance based on compensational balance, which has required changes in their lifestyles. It should be noted that they had to make these changes both for themselves and for the people around them. As it was revealed by Yassıbaş, Şahin, Çolak, and Toprak (2019), all the changes are based on the priority of supporting their own lives as parents of children with ASD.

In our study, when mothers were asked from whom they received support most, they stated their spouses and their mothers. Cavkaytar et al. (2008) state that spouses and parents were influential in the change of mothers' reactions. The mothers also stated that they received support from their spouses and their own mothers in their daily work, in the care and education of their children, and, in some cases, they received negative reactions from their parents and spouses. Research by Cavkaytar et al. (2008) is similar in terms of mothers receiving educational support and negative feedback from these people and differs in terms of mothers' moral support.

It was observed that the mothers are engaged more in social life while feeling less stress when they receive support from their spouses. Similar studies have emphasized that sharing with their spouses relieved mothers and that spousal support was important (Higgins, Bailey, & Pearce, 2005). Mothers stated that they changed their lifestyles and preferred to leave their current work environments due to conflicts experienced both in family and work contexts. In a study by Üstüner-Top (2009), mothers stated that the first problem they encountered was the context in which they lived. This has similarities with our study in which mothers tend to isolate themselves and create their own worlds.

As it can be seen in the third theme of navigating between compensating and conflicting balance, the search for balance is an ongoing process where there is no fixed balanced period. Even a minor change may disrupt the balance which may lead us to adjust ourselves. The quest for balance is a never-ending journey. Mothers of children with ASD continue to navigate this journey by sacrificing themselves and every small change can cause a significant change in their lives which affects them.

### **Limitations**

The limitation of this study is that data was collected with a single data collection technique. In future studies, mothers can be supported to write reflective diaries so that they can convey their instant experiences of balance as well as relating in-depth experiences. This study was conducted only on mothers. Further studies focusing on the experiences of fathers' could bring unique insights in the search for the work and family life balance.

## Conclusion

Mothers of children with ASD are constantly in search of balance in their work and family life experiences. Their experiences show that they seem to move between happiness and distress, and the happiest moments in their lives appear to be the times when they take positive steps with their children. Women can have more advantages and spare a little more time for themselves where they have spouse and family support. However, mothers of children with ASD are in the group that needs the most support. The fact that some of them have experienced divorce and their marriage has been affected in a negative way shows how the difficulties experienced by parents can move them to extremes. Mothers of children with ASD have difficulty in using their legal rights and their legal rights are not sufficiently known by the institution and workplace. There is a need to develop support mechanisms for families on a wide spectrum ranging from policymakers to schools, municipalities, and non-governmental organizations. It is expected that this study will provide unique insights for the scholarship of special education as well as informing the decisions of policy makers through projecting the lived experiences of mothers of children with ASD.

## Suggestions

Mothers seem to struggle to overcome the challenges they encounter in maintaining balance. For this reason, mothers can be provided with social support mechanisms to help them maintain a balance between their work and family lives. In addition, they struggle more when there is lack of information regarding their rights. Information training can be arranged at the institutions where working mothers of children with ASD work. In addition, intervention programs and seminars can be organized for mothers so that they can navigate the process of moving between compensational and conflicting balance. Guidebooks can be published and distributed at the national level. Follow up studies can be implemented to revisit the content of the existing laws and their applicability on the families of children with special needs as well as taking critical steps in the implementation.

This study has focused only on the experiences of mothers of children with ASD from the basis of work and family life balance. The ways in which strategies used to maintain balance can change in relation to the nature of the disability. Further studies can be conducted with mothers who have children with different disability types. The study can be supported with quantitative methodology as well as alternative qualitative designs in order to investigate the factors affecting the balance from multiple perspectives. In addition, interviews can be conducted with the mothers who resigned from their jobs due to their inability to maintain work-life balance.

## Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the working mothers of children with ASD who supported us by participating in our research.

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