



**THE UNSEEN EMBRACE: EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE
AMONG MOTHERS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

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ABSTRAK

Ibu yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus sering menghadapi tantangan psikologis dalam menerima kondisi anak. Penelitian sebelumnya menunjukkan bahwa dukungan sosial berkaitan dengan penerimaan diri pada orang tua anak berkebutuhan khusus. Namun, penelitian yang secara khusus mengkaji dukungan emosional sebagai bentuk dukungan yang berbeda dari dukungan sosial umum masih terbatas, terutama pada ibu yang cenderung menghadapi beban emosional lebih besar dalam pengasuhan anak berkebutuhan khusus. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji hubungan antara dukungan emosional dan penerimaan diri pada ibu yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus serta mengidentifikasi hubungan antar dimensi kedua variabel tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kuantitatif korelasional dengan teknik *snowball sampling* yang melibatkan ibu dari berbagai wilayah di Indonesia. Instrumen penelitian terdiri atas skala penerimaan diri dan skala dukungan emosional. Data dianalisis menggunakan korelasi Pearson Product Moment. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya hubungan positif yang signifikan antara dukungan emosional dan penerimaan diri. Analisis korelasi antar dimensi menunjukkan bahwa penghargaan positif memiliki hubungan paling kuat dengan kasih sayang tak bersyarat, sedangkan empati memiliki hubungan paling kuat dengan penerimaan terhadap keunikan anak. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa dukungan emosional berkaitan secara positif dengan penerimaan diri dan dapat menjadi sumber daya psikososial penting bagi ibu yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus. Secara praktis, hasil penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya intervensi keluarga berbasis empati dan penghargaan positif untuk memperkuat penerimaan diri ibu.

Kata kunci: *Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus, Dukungan Emosional, Empati, Ibu, Penerimaan Diri, Penghargaan Positif.*

ABSTRACT

Mothers of children with special needs often face psychological challenges in accepting their child's condition. Previous studies have shown that social support is associated with self-acceptance among parents of children with special needs. However, limited research has specifically examined emotional support as a distinct form of support separate from general social support, particularly among mothers who tend to experience greater emotional burdens in caregiving. This study aimed to examine the relationship between emotional support and self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs and to identify the associations between the dimensions of both constructs. A quantitative correlational design was employed using snowball sampling involving mothers from various regions of Indonesia. The instruments consisted of a self-acceptance scale and an emotional support scale. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment correlation. The results revealed a significant positive relationship



between emotional support and self-acceptance. Dimensional correlation analysis showed that positive regard had the strongest association with unconditional love, while empathy had the strongest association with acceptance of uniqueness. These findings indicate that emotional support is positively associated with self-acceptance and may serve as an important psychosocial resource for mothers of children with special needs. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of family-based interventions that strengthen empathy and positive regard to support maternal self-acceptance.

Keywords: *Children With Special Needs, Emotional Support, Empathy, Mothers, Positive Regard, Self-Acceptance.*

INTRODUCTION

The presence of a child in a family is often considered a blessing that brings happiness (Vebrianto & Satiningsih, 2021). However, not all children are born according to parental expectations. Some mothers are faced with the reality that their child has special needs. Children with special needs are children who have different conditions compared to other children, such as physical limitations, mental disorders, or suboptimal growth (Marlina et al, 2022). Data from Statistics Indonesia (2025) indicate that approximately 1.54 million children have special needs in Indonesia, yet only a small proportion have access to adequate education and services (Ujma et al., 2025). Discrimination against children with special needs still frequently occurs, even within the family environment itself, where approximately 35% of children with special needs experience discriminatory treatment from their own families ranging from restricted access to education to social isolation (Nurscholichah et al., 2024). Reported that discriminatory treatment toward children with special needs may occur not only in broader social environments but also within families, including restricted access to education and social isolation.

Mothers of children with special needs often experience difficulties in the process of accepting their child's condition (Rahayu & Ahyani, 2017). The selection of mothers as the focus of this study is based on empirical evidence showing that mothers frequently serve as the primary caregivers and tend to experience more intensive emotional, psychological, and caregiving burdens than fathers or parents in general. Ghaisani and Hendriani (2022) reported that parents who raise children with special needs experience substantial stress, with mothers often being more directly involved in daily caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, Asa et al. (2020) found that female caregivers of children with disabilities in Indonesia experienced psychosocial and economic burdens, including stigma, emotional distress, and social pressure. Asa et al. (2021) further showed that mothers and female caregivers used various coping strategies to manage psychological, sociocultural, and economic challenges in caring for children with disabilities. In addition, Yulianti et al. (2025) found that many mothers still experience difficulty accepting the fact that their child has special needs. These findings indicate that mothers represent a psychologically relevant group for understanding self-acceptance in the context of raising children with special needs.

Self-acceptance in this context refers to the mother's ability to recognize, accept, and appreciate herself as a parent of a child with special needs, including accepting the child's feelings, uniqueness, and needs without judging or rejecting life experiences (Sumiati et al., 2022). Positive self-acceptance enables mothers to provide unconditional love, accept children's emotional expressions openly, appreciate the unique characteristics of children, and acknowledge children's needs for autonomy and independence. However, when mothers lack



self-acceptance, they may experience emotional conflict, self-blame, shame, or difficulty providing optimal support for their children. Therefore, understanding factors associated with maternal self-acceptance is important because the mother's psychological condition may shape caregiving quality, family interaction, and the child's developmental environment.

One psychosocial factor that influences self-acceptance is emotional support (Nento & Lambause, 2024). Emotional support is social assistance characterized by empathy, attention, affection, and emotional warmth (Sarafino & Smith, 2011). Research by Mokoagow et al. (2025) shows that social support from family and the surrounding environment plays an important role in increasing self-acceptance in mothers of children with special needs. Optimal emotional support can help individuals get through difficult times, reduce stress, and ultimately increase their self-acceptance toward the conditions they face (Sangian et al., 2017). However, in reality, research by Idhartono and Hidayati (2024) shows that the subjective well-being of mothers of children with special needs tends to be low due to minimal emotional support from their surroundings, thus hindering the process of accepting their child's condition.

Although previous studies have examined the relationship between social support and self-acceptance among parents of children with special needs (Mokoagow et al., 2025; Sangian et al., 2017), several limitations remain. First, most studies have treated "parents" as a homogeneous group, without distinguishing between mothers and fathers, despite evidence suggesting that mothers tend to experience greater emotional burdens and distinct adaptation patterns (Ghaisani & Hendriani, 2022). Second, prior research has largely focused on social support in general, with limited attention to the specific role of emotional support, including empathy, care, attention, positive regard, and encouragement, particularly in the Indonesian context. Furthermore, previous studies have primarily examined the overall relationship between social support and parental outcomes, without investigating how specific dimensions of emotional support relate to distinct dimensions of self-acceptance. Unlike previous studies that examined social support as a general construct, this study specifically tests emotional support and its five dimensions in relation to four dimensions of maternal self-acceptance. This dimensional approach represents the novelty of the present study because it provides a more detailed explanation of which components of emotional support are most closely associated with particular aspects of self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs.

Building on these gaps, this study adopts a more specific approach by examining both the overall relationship between emotional support and self-acceptance and the associations between their respective dimensions. The dimensions of emotional support examined in this study include empathy, care, attention, positive regard, and encouragement, while the dimensions of self-acceptance include unconditional love, acceptance of feelings, acceptance of uniqueness, and acknowledgment of needs. This study focuses on mothers of children with special needs in Indonesia because they are often directly involved in daily caregiving and may face emotional challenges related to stigma, social expectations, and acceptance of the child's condition..

Therefore, the present study aims to: (1) examine the relationship between emotional support and self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs; (2) identify which dimensions of emotional support are most strongly associated with dimensions of self-acceptance. Based on previous literature, it was hypothesized that emotional support would be positively associated with self-acceptance. Furthermore, higher levels of emotional support are expected to be linked to higher levels of self-acceptance. This study also explores the



relationships between specific dimensions of emotional support and self-acceptance to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these constructs.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between emotional support and self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs in Indonesia. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. The inclusion criteria were mothers of children with special needs, residing in Indonesia, and willing to participate voluntarily. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms and communities of parents of children with special needs between November and December 2025. Prior to completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to discontinue participation at any time. Participants provided informed consent electronically before proceeding to the questionnaire. A total of 149 participants from various regions of Indonesia participated in this study.

Self-acceptance was measured using a scale developed based on the dimensions proposed by Sumiati et al. (2022), namely unconditional love, acceptance of feelings, acceptance of uniqueness, and acknowledgment of needs. Prior to pilot testing, the items were reviewed by the research supervisor to evaluate their relevance, clarity, and appropriateness for measuring the intended constructs. The final scale consisted of 14 valid items following item analysis using corrected item-total correlation, comprising 8 favorable and 6 unfavorable items. Example items included “I continue to love my child even when he/she is disobedient” and “I do not compare my child with other children.” A pilot test involving 30 mothers of children with special needs indicated corrected item-total correlations ranging from .307 to .754. The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .730$).

Emotional support was measured using a scale developed based on the dimensions proposed by Sarafino and Smith (2011), namely empathy, care, attention, positive regard, and encouragement. Prior to pilot testing, the items were reviewed by the research supervisor to evaluate their relevance, clarity, and appropriateness for measuring the intended constructs. The scale consisted of 20 valid items, comprising 10 favorable and 10 unfavorable items. Example items included “My family understands my feelings as a parent of a child with special needs” and “My family appreciates and acknowledges all the efforts I make as a parent of a child with special needs.” A pilot test involving 30 mothers of children with special needs showed corrected item-total correlations ranging from .369 to .896. All items met the validity criterion and were retained. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .961$).

Both instruments used a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Favorable items were scored from 1 to 4, whereas unfavorable items were reverse-scored.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Preliminary analyses included tests of normality using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and linearity testing. The study hypothesis was examined using Pearson Product Moment correlation. Additional correlation analyses between dimensions were conducted to examine associations between specific dimensions of emotional support and self-acceptance. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Participant Characteristics

This study involved 149 mothers of children with special needs from various regions in Indonesia.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 149)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18–24 years	15	10.1
	25–34 years	42	28.2
	35–44 years	61	40.9
	≥45 years	31	20.8
Marital Status	Married	134	89.9
	Divorced / Widowed	15	10.1
Education Level	Elementary School	5	3.4
	Junior High School	11	7.4
	Senior High School	37	24.8
	Diploma	35	23.5
	Bachelor's Degree	55	36.9
	Postgraduate	6	4.0
Occupation	Homemaker	85	57.1
	Self-employed	20	13.4
	Employee (Public/Private)	42	28.2
	Others	2	1.3
Child's Condition	Autism Spectrum Disorder	45	30.2
	ADHD	36	24.2
	Dyslexia	20	13.4
	Others	48	32.2
Birth Order	First child	57	38.3
	Second child	65	43.6
	Third child	27	18.1

Note. ADHD = Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1. The majority of participants were aged 35-44 years (40.9%), married (89.9%), held a bachelor's degree (36.9%), and were homemakers (57.1%). In terms of children's conditions, Autism Spectrum Disorder (30.2%), ADHD (24.2%), and Dyslexia (13.4%) were the most commonly reported. Most children were second-born (43.6%), followed by first-born (38.3%), and third-born (18.1%). Detailed results are presented in Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analysis showed that participants tended to have high levels of self-acceptance and emotional support. Detailed descriptive statistics and score categorization are presented in Table 2.



Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Score Categorization

Variable	Mean	SD	Hyp. Mean	Hyp. SD	Categorization				
					Very Low n	Low n	Moderate n	High n	Very High n
Self-Acceptance	41.41	6.22	40	8	3	23	69	49	5
Emotional Support	58.95	11.66	50	10	3	15	33	55	43

Notes. Hyp. Mean = Hypothetical Mean; Hyp. SD = Hypothetical Standard Deviation

Based on Table 2, the mean score of self-acceptance was 41.41 with a standard deviation of 6.22, which was slightly higher than the hypothetical mean of 40. This indicates that, in general, mothers in this study tended to have a moderate to high level of self-acceptance. Most respondents were in the moderate category (n = 69), followed by the high category (n = 49), low category (n = 23), very high category (n = 5), and very low category (n = 3). Meanwhile, the mean score of emotional support was 58.95 with a standard deviation of 11.66, which was higher than the hypothetical mean of 50. This suggests that respondents generally perceived a relatively high level of emotional support. Most respondents were in the high category (n = 55), followed by the very high category (n = 43), moderate category (n = 33), low category (n = 15), and very low category (n = 3). Overall, these descriptive results indicate that the mothers participating in this study generally reported favorable levels of self-acceptance and emotional support.

Assumption Tests

Assumption testing indicated that all variables were normally distributed and had a linear relationship. Therefore, Pearson correlation analysis could be conducted. Detailed results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Assumption Test

Test	Variable (s)	Statistic	p-value	Interpretation
Normality	Self-Acceptance	.064	.200	Normally distributed
	Emotional Support	.072	.059	Normally distributed
Linearity	Self-Acceptance – Emotional Support	F = .978	.517	Linear

Note. All assumptions were met (p > .05)

Based on Table 3, the normality test results show that the data for self-acceptance and emotional support were normally distributed. This is indicated by the significance value for self-acceptance of .200 and emotional support of .059, both of which are greater than .05. In addition, the linearity test results show that the relationship between self-acceptance and emotional support was linear, with F = .978 and p = .517. Therefore, all statistical assumptions were met, and Pearson Product Moment correlation analysis could be conducted.



Hypothesis Test

Table 4. Correlation Test between Emotional Support and Self-Acceptance

Variables	r value	r critical	p-value
Emotional Support – Self-Acceptance	.664	.139	.001

Based on Table 4. Pearson Product Moment correlation analysis showed a significant positive relationship between emotional support and self-acceptance ($r = .664, p < .001$). The strength of the relationship is classified as high based on correlation coefficient interpretation categories. These results indicate that the higher levels of emotional support are associated with higher levels of self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs.

Correlation Between Dimension Analysis

Further analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between specific dimensions of emotional support and of self-acceptance.

Table 5. Correlation Between Dimensions of Emotional Support and Self-Acceptance

Dimensions of Emotional Support	Unconditional Love	Acceptance of Feelings	Acceptance of Uniqueness	Acknowledgment of Needs
Empathy	.567***	.588***	.619***	.594***
Care	.480***	.534***	.537***	.529***
Attention	.515***	.529***	.539***	.536***
Positive Regard	.638***	.574***	.614***	.593***
Encouragement	.511***	.538***	.547***	.549***

Notes. *** $p < .001$

Based on Table 4. Results showed that positive regard had the highest correlation with unconditional love ($r = .638, p < .001$). Empathy had the highest correlation with acceptance of feelings ($r = .588, p < .001$), acceptance of uniqueness ($r = .619, p < .001$), and acknowledgment of needs ($r = .594, p < .001$). All correlations between dimensions of emotional support and dimensions of self-acceptance showed significance at $p < .001$. Detailed results are presented in Table 5.

Discussion

The present findings demonstrated a significant positive relationship between emotional support and self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs ($r = .664, p < .001$), supporting the study hypothesis. Emotional support was associated with approximately 44.1% of the variance in self-acceptance ($r^2 = .441$), indicating a substantial association between the two variables. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that support from family and the surrounding environment is associated with higher self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs (Mokoagow et al., 2025). Emotional support, characterized by empathy, attention, and a sense of being valued, may contribute to more positive self-perceptions among mothers facing caregiving challenges (Dwitami & Selian, 2025).

The strength of this relationship may be understood through the stress-buffering hypothesis, which posits that social support moderates the adverse effects of stressors on psychological well-being by providing individuals with perceived and actual resources to manage stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This mechanism has been reaffirmed in contemporary literature: as stress levels increase, the buffering function of social support may become



increasingly critical. In the context of this research, mothers who reported higher emotional support also tended to report more positive self-views, which may reflect the psychological reassurance associated with supportive interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Rogers (1959) person-centered theory proposes that self-acceptance tends to develop when individuals receive unconditional positive regard from others. Emotional support that includes empathy and warmth may be associated with psychological growth and a more positive self-regard. These findings suggest that emotional support may represent an important psychosocial resource associated with adaptive psychological outcomes among mothers of children with special needs.

However, this pattern does not appear universal across all contexts. Lubis et al. (2024), in a study of Indonesian mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that the moderating role of social support on psychological distress was significant but varied depending on individual coping orientations suggesting that the quality and perceived adequacy of emotional support, rather than its mere presence, may be more determinative of psychological outcomes. Similarly, (Asa et al. 2021), in a qualitative study of mothers of children with disabilities in Belu district, Indonesia, found that while family support was commonly used as a coping strategy, some participants relied more heavily on self-reliance and religious coping in the absence of consistent social support, indicating that the relationship between external emotional support and self-acceptance may be moderated by individual and cultural factors.

Correlation between dimensions revealed specific patterns of association between components of emotional support and dimensions of self-acceptance. Positive regard showed the strongest association with unconditional love ($r = .638, p < .001$). This finding is consistent with Rogers (1959) person-centered framework, which emphasizes that self-acceptance may develop when individuals receive unconditional positive regard from significant others. In this context, positive regard may communicate to mothers that their personal worth is not dependent on perfect caregiving performance or the child's condition. When mothers receive appreciation, acceptance, and recognition from spouses or family members, they may be more likely to develop a more accepting view of themselves and their parenting role. Hosokawa and Katsura (2024) similarly found that the quality of support and regard received from significant others may be related to parental adjustment and caregiving orientation. In the Indonesian context, where family and community relationships strongly shape self-perception, positive regard from spouses, extended family, and the surrounding environment may strengthen mothers' confidence in their parenting role (Yulianti et al., 2025). However, it should also be noted that Asa et al. (2021) documented that stigma and non-acceptance from husbands and communities remain present in some Indonesian settings, which may limit the availability of positive regard for certain mothers.

Empathy also showed strong associations with acceptance of feelings ($r = .588, p < .001$) and acceptance of uniqueness ($r = .619, p < .001$). The association between empathy and acceptance of feelings is consistent with the view that empathy functions as emotional validation (Jeon & Park, 2024) when mothers receive empathetic responses from their social networks, their emotional experiences, including sadness, ambivalence, and frustration, may be acknowledged rather than dismissed, potentially reducing emotional suppression and encouraging greater acceptance of their own emotional states. (Girindani & Elisa, 2023; Whiting et al., 2019).





The notably strong association between empathy and acceptance of uniqueness warrants particular critical attention. One plausible explanation is that empathy, when received by mothers, may not only validate their own emotional experiences but may also model a non-judgmental orientation toward difference. Mothers who feel genuinely understood including in the difficulties specific to raising a child with special needs may become more capable of extending a similarly accepting orientation toward their child's distinctive characteristics, without relying on normative comparison (Karin et al., 2023). This interpretation is consistent with findings from studies on disability stigma in Indonesia: Asa et al. (2020) documented that female caregivers of children with disabilities in Indonesia experienced psychological burden partly as a result of stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors from others, suggesting that the receipt of empathy may serve as a counterweight to such external invalidation, potentially supporting mothers' capacity to perceive their child's uniqueness in less stigmatized terms. However, it should be noted that this interpretation remains speculative given the cross-sectional and self-report nature of the present data.

Overall, these results highlight that not all components of emotional support contribute equally; rather, specific elements such as positive regard and empathy appear to play a more prominent role in shaping different dimensions of self-acceptance.

Findings of this research enrich the theoretical understanding of factors associated with the psychological well-being of mothers of children with special needs. This study integrates two major theoretical perspectives the stress-buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and person-centered theory (Rogers, 1959) to provide a conceptual explanation for the association between emotional support and self-acceptance. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that specific components of emotional support, particularly positive regard and empathy, show differential associations with distinct dimensions of self-acceptance. These results extend previous studies that have generally treated social support as a unitary construct. To the authors' knowledge, few studies in the Indonesian context have examined emotional support at the dimensional level in relation to dimensions of self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs.

Practically, these findings have implications for the development of intervention programs for mothers of children with special needs. Family psychoeducation programs could be designed to promote positive regard and empathy from spouses and family members. Special education institutions may consider developing structured support groups that facilitate experience sharing and mutual emotional support. Mental health practitioners may find it useful to integrate exploration of emotional support within individual counseling sessions, drawing on person-centered approaches to help mothers develop more adaptive self-acceptance.

This study has several limitations. First, the use of snowball sampling and online questionnaire distribution resulted in uneven geographic distribution of respondents. Second, self-report methods are susceptible to social desirability bias. Third, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that emotional support is significantly and positively associated with self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs. Positive regard and empathy are components of emotional support that have the strongest associations to self-acceptance, particularly in dimensions of unconditional love and acceptance of the child's uniqueness. These findings highlight the important role of emotional appears to be an important





psychosocial resource associated with self-acceptance among mothers of children with special needs.

These findings support the development of family-based psychoeducation programs, mother support groups, and counseling interventions emphasizing empathy and positive regard. Future research is recommended to use longitudinal or experimental designs with mixed methods to obtain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of emotional support and self-acceptance. Further studies can also explore moderator variables such as severity of the child's disability and mediator variables such as self-compassion to enrich the theoretical model of the relationship between emotional support and self-acceptance.

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