

Parental Understanding and Early Detection of ADHD: A Qualitative Exploration in Indonesia

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Abstract

Misunderstanding and stigma around children's behavioral challenges often lead to delayed recognition of neurodevelopmental disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in Indonesia. Children with ADHD are frequently labeled as disruptive or disobedient, when in fact they require specific support to manage inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. Early detection plays a crucial role in minimizing the long-term impact on their emotional and social development. However, parental awareness of ADHD remains low. This qualitative study explores parents' knowledge and ability to recognize early signs of ADHD. Using semi-structured interviews with 35 parents, results revealed that most participants had very limited or no prior understanding of the condition. Many parents were unfamiliar with the term ADHD itself, and those who had heard of it often held inaccurate beliefs, viewing the behavior as a result of poor discipline or parenting. As a result, early symptoms were frequently dismissed or misunderstood, leading to delays in seeking appropriate professional help. This lack of awareness contributes to missed opportunities for early intervention and can negatively affect the child's mental health. The study emphasizes the urgent need for targeted psychoeducation for parents to promote early identification and more effective support for children with ADHD.

Keywords: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), parental understanding, early detection, stigma, Indonesia

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Introduction

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders in childhood, characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that are inconsistent with the child's developmental level (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). This disorder not only affects academic functioning but also has significant long-term implications for social functioning, emotional regulation, and the development of self-concept (Barkley, 2015; Willcutt, 2012). Therefore, an accurate understanding of ADHD is a critical prerequisite for effective early detection and intervention efforts. Globally, the prevalence of ADHD in children is estimated to range between 5% and 7%, with considerable variation influenced by diagnostic criteria, cultural context, and access to mental health services (Faraone et al., 2021; Polanczyk et al., 2015). However, numerous studies emphasize that reported prevalence rates are often lower than the actual condition due to widespread underdiagnosis, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Mulraney et al., 2023). This phenomenon indicates that a substantial number of children with ADHD remain unidentified and do not receive appropriate support.

In the Indonesian context, national epidemiological data on ADHD remain limited. Nevertheless, several local studies have indicated a relatively high prevalence of ADHD symptoms among preschool and school-aged children (Nasri et al., 2025). Limitations in systematic screening, shortages of child mental health professionals, and low levels of mental health literacy among the general population have been identified as key factors contributing to delayed ADHD detection in Indonesia (Maulinda & Lubis, 2024). One of the most significant challenges in early ADHD detection is parental and environmental misunderstanding of children's behavioral difficulties. Children with ADHD are frequently perceived as "naughty," "undisciplined," or "poorly raised," rather than being recognized as individuals with specific developmental needs (Hinshaw et al., 2022). Such perceptions result in ADHD-related behaviors being framed as moral or disciplinary problems rather than as manifestations of a neurobiological condition that requires professional intervention.

Research conducted in Indonesia consistently shows that parental knowledge of ADHD characteristics remains at a low to moderate level. Many parents struggle to distinguish between developmentally typical active behavior and pathological symptoms of inattention and impulsivity (Qonitaton & Putri, 2024). This lack of understanding often leads parents to delay seeking professional consultation and to rely on inappropriate disciplinary strategies, such as verbal or physical punishment, which may exacerbate children's emotional difficulties (Mulraney et al., 2023).

These misunderstandings are further reinforced by persistent social stigma surrounding mental health and developmental disorders in children. Stigma related to ADHD commonly manifests through negative stereotypes, social labeling, and the attribution of blame to parents (Yusnia & Kurniadewi, 2025). Consequently, children with ADHD face increased risks of social rejection, bullying, and exclusion within school and community environments, which directly undermines their psychological well-being. From a parental perspective, stigma generates substantial psychological burdens, including feelings of guilt, shame, and fear of negative social labeling directed at their children (Schoeman & Voges, 2022). Qualitative studies have revealed that many parents postpone or avoid diagnostic processes due to concerns that their child may be stigmatized or treated differently by schools and the broader community (Sayal et al., 2018).

This combination of stigma and limited parental understanding directly contributes to delays in early ADHD detection. In contrast, extensive evidence highlights that early identification and intervention play a crucial role in reducing the long-term adverse effects of ADHD on children's emotional, social, and academic development (Sonuga-Barke et al., 2013). Children who receive early intervention tend to demonstrate better self-regulation skills and more adaptive social functioning. Early detection of ADHD extends beyond the clinical diagnostic process and involves parents' ability to recognize early warning signs and engage in appropriate help-seeking behaviors. The literature consistently indicates that parental understanding is a key predictor of decisions to access child mental health services (Mulraney et al., 2023). Thus, parents play a central role in the early detection pathway for ADHD.

Cultural context also shapes how parents interpret children's behavior and developmental challenges. In collectivistic societies such as Indonesia, children's behavior is often evaluated based on social conformity and obedience to group norms. As a result, impulsive or inattentive behaviors are more likely to be perceived as behavioral deviance rather than as manifestations of a neurodevelopmental condition (Chairil, 2022). This underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in understanding parental experiences related to ADHD.

Numerous studies emphasize the need for family- and community-based psychoeducational approaches to enhance ADHD literacy and reduce stigma (Nasri et al., 2025). Educational programs that involve parents, teachers, and healthcare professionals have been shown to improve early detection capacities and promote more adaptive and supportive parenting practices for children with ADHD (Mulraney et al., 2023). Despite these findings, research that specifically explores Indonesian parents' understanding of ADHD and their experiences with early detection remains limited, particularly from a qualitative perspective. Most existing studies focus on quantitative assessments or symptom prevalence, with limited attention to parents' subjective meanings and psychosocial dynamics (Maulinda & Lubis, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to explore in depth Indonesian parents' understanding of ADHD and their experiences related to the early detection process. By employing a qualitative approach, this research seeks to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of educational strategies, policies, and early detection services for ADHD that are culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and family centered.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to gain an in-depth understanding of parental perceptions, interpretations, and experiences related to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and early detection within the Indonesian context. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate given the study's aim to explore subjective meanings, social constructions, and contextual factors surrounding parental understanding and stigma, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Exploratory qualitative research is particularly suitable in areas where empirical evidence is still limited and where cultural nuances play a significant role in shaping experiences and beliefs (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Participants

Participants consisted of 35 parents, recruited using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives. The sample included parents who have children formally diagnosed with ADHD, as well as parents who have had direct interaction with children exhibiting ADHD-related behaviors in familial, educational, or community settings. Such variation is essential in qualitative research to enhance the richness and depth of the data and to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express their personal experiences, beliefs, and emotional responses regarding children's behavioral challenges and ADHD detection, while still providing sufficient flexibility for probing and clarification (Creswell & Poth, 2018). FGDs were conducted to explore shared meanings, social norms, and collective perceptions related to ADHD, stigma, and parental responsibility within the community context (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The combination of individual and group data collection methods enabled methodological triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings (Flick, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, this method was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. A reflexive approach was adopted throughout the analytic process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives while acknowledging the researchers' positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how parental knowledge, stigma, and cultural beliefs intersect in shaping early detection of ADHD.

Result

Thematic analysis of data obtained from semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) revealed several recurring patterns related to parental understanding, interpretation, and responses toward ADHD and its early symptoms. Overall, the findings indicate a substantial lack of awareness and pervasive misconceptions among parents, which significantly influenced help-seeking behaviors and early detection processes.

Limited Awareness and Lack of Familiarity With ADHD

Most participants reported having very limited or no prior knowledge of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. During both individual interviews and FGDs, many parents explicitly stated that they were unfamiliar with the term *ADHD* before encountering children who exhibited persistent behavioral difficulties. Even among participants who had heard the term, understanding of ADHD was often superficial and fragmented. ADHD was commonly perceived as a "*foreign*" or "*medical*" label that felt distant from everyday parenting experiences. This limited awareness was consistently expressed across participants with different backgrounds, suggesting that ADHD knowledge remains largely inaccessible at the community level.

Misinterpretation of ADHD-Related Behaviors

A prominent theme emerging from the data was the misinterpretation of ADHD symptoms as behavioral or moral problems. Parents frequently described inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity as signs of poor discipline, lack of parental control, or intentional misbehavior. In FGDs, these views were often reinforced collectively, as participants shared similar beliefs that children should be able to regulate their behavior if adequately guided or disciplined. As a result, ADHD-related behaviors were framed as parenting failures rather than indicators of a neurodevelopmental condition requiring professional attention.

Normalization and Dismissal of Early Symptoms

The analysis further revealed that early symptoms of ADHD were commonly normalized or dismissed by parents. Many participants described perceiving excessive activity, distractibility, or impulsivity as typical childhood behavior that would naturally diminish with age. In both interviews and FGDs, parents expressed beliefs that children would “*grow out of it*,” particularly during early childhood. This normalization process contributed to a delay in recognizing the persistence and functional impact of the symptoms, reducing the likelihood of early professional consultation.

Delayed Help-Seeking and Missed Early Intervention

Due to limited understanding and persistent misconceptions, parents often delayed seeking professional help. Participants reported relying on informal strategies such as stricter discipline, increased supervision, or advice from family members before considering consultation with mental health professionals. In FGDs, several parents acknowledged that professional help was usually sought only after behavioral problems began to significantly disrupt academic performance or social relationships. This pattern reflects a missed window for early intervention, which participants retrospectively recognized as potentially detrimental to the child’s emotional well-being.

Perceived Impact on Children’s Mental and Emotional Well-being

Parents who had prolonged exposure to children with untreated ADHD symptoms described observable negative effects on the child’s mental health, including increased emotional dysregulation, frustration, low self-confidence, and social difficulties. Although these impacts were often recognized later, participants reflected that earlier understanding and intervention might have mitigated these outcomes. These reflections emerged strongly during FGDs, where shared experiences allowed parents to collectively acknowledge the long-term consequences of delayed recognition.

Overall, the results demonstrate that limited parental understanding, pervasive misconceptions, and delayed help-seeking behaviors form an interconnected pattern that hinders early detection of ADHD. Thematic analysis highlights how these factors operate both at the individual and social levels, underscoring the critical role of parental awareness in facilitating timely identification and intervention for children with ADHD.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that parental awareness of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) remains notably limited, particularly at the community level. Most participants reported minimal familiarity with ADHD prior to encountering persistent behavioral challenges in children. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that parental knowledge of ADHD is generally low, especially outside clinical settings, which significantly hampers early identification and intervention efforts (Rajcumar & Paruk, 2020). Limited awareness has been repeatedly identified as a primary barrier preventing parents from recognizing ADHD as a neurodevelopmental condition rather than a behavioral issue (Fan et al., 2022). The lack of familiarity with ADHD terminology further reinforces misconceptions surrounding the disorder. In this study, many parents described ADHD as a “medical” or “foreign” concept that felt disconnected from daily parenting experiences. Such perceptions contribute to delayed recognition, as parents may not associate early behavioral signs with a diagnosable condition requiring professional assessment (Sayal et al., 2010).

Misinterpretation of ADHD-related behaviors emerged as a dominant theme in both interviews and FGDs. Parents frequently framed symptoms such as inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity as manifestations of poor discipline or inadequate parenting. This pattern has been widely reported in previous research, which shows that parents often attribute ADHD symptoms to moral or behavioral failings rather than neurodevelopmental differences (Barkley, 2015). These misconceptions are particularly persistent in contexts where mental health literacy is limited and behavioral conformity is highly valued (Hinshaw et al., 2021). Normalization and dismissal of early ADHD symptoms were also prominent across participants. Many parents perceived excessive activity or distractibility as developmentally typical and believed that children would naturally “outgrow” these behaviors. This belief has been documented in previous research as a significant factor contributing to delayed diagnosis, particularly during early childhood (Theule, et al., 2013). The tendency to normalize symptoms reduces the perceived urgency to seek professional evaluation, thereby narrowing the window for early intervention.

Delayed help-seeking emerged as a direct consequence of limited awareness and persistent misconceptions. Parents in this study often relied on informal strategies, including stricter discipline or advice from family members, before considering professional consultation. Similar help-seeking trajectories have been identified in prior studies, which show that parents typically seek clinical services only after behavioral difficulties begin to interfere with academic performance or peer relationships (Sayal et al., 2018). This delay reflects a missed opportunity for early intervention, which is critical for improving long-term outcomes in children with ADHD (Faraone et al., 2021).

Parents’ reflections on the emotional and psychological impact of untreated ADHD symptoms further underscore the consequences of delayed recognition. Participants described increased emotional dysregulation, frustration, low self-esteem, and social difficulties in children who did not receive early support. These observations align with longitudinal research demonstrating that delayed identification of ADHD is associated with heightened risks of emotional and social problems (Thomas et al., 2015). Early intervention has been shown to significantly reduce these secondary difficulties and promote more adaptive developmental trajectories (Sonuga-Barke et al., 2013). Stigma emerged as a cross-cutting factor influencing parental perceptions and behaviors. Parents expressed concerns about labeling, social judgment, and negative stereotypes associated with ADHD. Previous studies have similarly

documented that stigma surrounding ADHD discourages parents from pursuing diagnosis and treatment, particularly in societies where mental health conditions are associated with shame or parental failure (Hinshaw et al., 2021). This stigma not only delays help-seeking but also exacerbates parental stress and emotional burden (Mueller et al., 2012).

Taken together, the findings of this study support existing evidence that limited parental understanding, behavioral misinterpretation, symptom normalization, and stigma operate in an interconnected manner to hinder early detection of ADHD. These results highlight the critical need for culturally sensitive, parent-focused psychoeducational initiatives aimed at improving ADHD literacy and reducing stigma at the community level. Prior intervention studies have demonstrated that increasing parental knowledge significantly enhances early recognition and engagement with mental health services (Fan et al., 2022). Therefore, strengthening parental awareness should be considered a central component of early detection strategies for ADHD in Indonesia.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of parental understanding in the early detection of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) within the Indonesian context. The findings demonstrate that misunderstandings and stigma surrounding children's behavioral challenges remain pervasive, contributing to delayed recognition of ADHD symptoms. Most parents in this study possessed limited or no prior knowledge of ADHD, and those who were somewhat familiar with the term often held inaccurate beliefs, interpreting ADHD-related behaviors as consequences of poor discipline or ineffective parenting. Such misconceptions led to the normalization and dismissal of early symptoms, resulting in delays in seeking professional assistance and missed opportunities for early intervention. These delays have important implications for children's emotional, social, and psychological well-being, as untreated ADHD symptoms may escalate and contribute to secondary difficulties over time. The findings underscore that parental awareness is a crucial entry point in the pathway toward timely identification and intervention.

Overall, this study emphasizes the urgent need for targeted, culturally sensitive psychoeducational initiatives aimed at improving parental literacy regarding ADHD. Strengthening parents' ability to recognize early signs and understand ADHD as a neurodevelopmental condition is essential for reducing stigma, promoting timely help-seeking, and ensuring more effective support for children with ADHD. Such efforts are vital to improving developmental outcomes and enhancing the overall well-being of children and families in Indonesia.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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