

# Inclusive Tourism for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Parental Perceptions in Bandung City

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**Abstract**—This study aims to identify the perceptions of parents who have children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) regarding the safety and comfort needed by children when participating in tourist activities. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with parents of children with ASD. Most children with ASD face unique challenges and difficulties in life, particularly when participating in tourism activities. The study findings indicate that tourism activities are significantly influenced by safety and comfort factors. Perceptions of safety include parents' concerns and anxieties. Perceptions of comfort involve the availability of an environment that addresses the child's sensory, emotional, and social needs. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of implementing inclusive tourism for children with ASD, tailored to their needs and preferences regarding the unique challenges and issues they face, to create a enjoyable travel experience.

**Keywords**— *autism spectrum disorder; comfort; inclusive tourism*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Family tourism has been widely recognized as an important context for strengthening emotional bonds and supporting children's social development (Pearce, 1988; Lehto

et al., 2009). However, the benefits of tourism are not experienced equally by all families. For families with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), participation in tourism activities presents significant challenges due to sensory sensitivities, communication difficulties, and resistance to unfamiliar environments or routine changes. These characteristics can transform tourism settings—often crowded, unpredictable, and stimulus-intensive—into sources of stress rather than well-being.

Tourism provides greater benefits when undertaken with family. Family tourism serves not only as a recreational activity but also as a means of fostering togetherness and strengthening relationships among family members. Family tourism is one form of activity expected to create positive experiences for all family members. Lehto et al. (2009) emphasized that family tourism contributes significantly to strengthening emotional bonds, improving communication, and supporting children's social development.

However, tourism activities are not always optimally enjoyed by all families, especially families with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Children with ASD have very diverse characteristics and needs, ranging from low-functioning, medium-functioning, to high-functioning. In general, children with ASD experience difficulties in communication and social interaction, have sensory sensitivities to light, sound, and crowds, and exhibit

limitations in coping with changes in routine. These conditions make tourism particularly challenging for families.

In such contexts, parents assume a central role as decision-makers and risk evaluators. The perceived safety and comfort of destinations become critical determinants of travel participation. Despite the growing discourse on inclusive and autism-friendly tourism, existing discussions remain largely conceptual and policy-oriented. Empirical evidence focusing specifically on parents' perceptions of safety and comfort in tourism settings for children with ASD remains limited, particularly in developing country contexts such as Indonesia, where accessible infrastructure and autism-informed tourism services are still emerging.

This gap is significant. Without a clear understanding of how parents assess risks, accessibility, and environmental suitability, efforts to develop inclusive tourism risk remain normative rather than evidence-based. Moreover, the absence of context-specific research constrains the formulation of practical strategies for tourism stakeholders in emerging destinations.

Therefore, this study aims to examine parents' perceptions of safety and comfort for children with ASD during tourism activities and to identify the factors shaping these perceptions. By providing empirical insights from a parental perspective in the Indonesian context, this research advances the literature on inclusive tourism beyond conceptual advocacy and lays a foundation for developing more responsive, autism-friendly tourism environments.

## II. METHOD

This research utilized a qualitative phenomenological method to investigate the lived experiences of parents with children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) during travel. A phenomenological design was deemed suitable, as the study sought to explore the meanings, feelings, and personal interpretations that parents form before, during, and after their travel experiences. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with six parents of children with ASD in Bandung. The interviews centered on three key areas: (1) parents' planning before the trip, (2) tactics employed to handle the journey from start to finish, and (3) parents' emotions and degree of contentment following the travel experience. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data were examined utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as created by Jonathan A. Smith. IPA was chosen due to its focus on understanding how people interpret their personal experiences. The examination occurred in multiple phases: (1) reading and rereading transcripts for data immersion, (2) initial noting to pinpoint key statements, (3) forming emerging themes, (4) looking for relationships among themes within each case, and (5) recognizing patterns across participants to create superordinate themes.

This analytical method enabled the researcher to grasp the common experiences and the distinct interpretations formed by each parent. Choosing a phenomenological

approach resonates with John W. Creswell's (2016) view that qualitative research is appropriate for examining the detailed experiences of individuals, especially those belonging to marginalized or underrepresented communities. In this context, parents of children with ASD comprise a demographic whose travel experiences are frequently neglected, rendering phenomenology a suitable framework to understand their lived experiences.

To ensure the study's trustworthiness and rigor, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was conducted by comparing and cross-checking data from multiple interviews to identify consistent patterns and discrepancies. Member checking was also implemented, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their transcribed statements and emerging interpretations. Additionally, the researcher maintained a reflective journal throughout the data collection and analysis process to monitor personal biases and assumptions that could influence the interpretation of participants' experiences.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. Furthermore, the study adhered to culturally sensitive practices, recognizing the unique challenges faced by parents of children with ASD, ensuring that the research process was respectful, empathetic, and non-intrusive. These measures collectively strengthened the credibility, dependability, and ethical integrity of the research findings.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed two key areas influencing parents' travel experiences with children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): feelings of safety and feelings of comfort. The types of concerns experienced by parents with ASD, based on interviews, are as follows:

1. Children's sensory sensitivities, such as crowds, loud music/songs, and excessively bright or dark lighting. Informant M stated: "When going to tourist attractions, the key is to avoid places that are too noisy or hot. So, as parents, we have to be smart about managing the time and place for family trips."
2. Changes in routine, such as traveling, can cause stress for children with ASD due to new travels, new places, and new routines, as most children with ASD are rigid about routines. Informant PB shared her experience: "He's rigid. He doesn't want to go to public restrooms because he thinks they're dirty. He's also a picky eater, so it's a bit difficult on vacation."
3. Children's social responses, such as suddenly screaming at tourist destinations, crying, and refusing to engage in social interactions. Like Mrs. FM's experience: "We once took Qq to Yogyakarta by train. She was very active,

running around on the train and then suddenly started crying, almost all the passengers were staring at us."

Alterations in routine were likewise regarded as important risk factors. Parents noted that unfamiliar surroundings, different eating habits, and the utilization of public amenities might lead to anxiety and refusal in their kids. Inflexibility in everyday habits frequently rendered adjusting to travel difficult. Moreover, children's erratic social behavior, such as unexpected crying, shouting, or withdrawal from social engagement, heightened parents' alertness, especially in public spaces where social scrutiny from others amplified emotional strain.

From the interviews, three types of anxiety were identified:

1. Anticipatory anxiety: occurs before traveling.

Anticipatory anxiety arises well before the actual departure, during the planning and preparation stages of the trip. Even though parents understand the benefits of traveling for both themselves and their child with ASD, they often experience deep concerns about potential negative outcomes for their child, such as physical fatigue, sensory overstimulation, or emotional dysregulation, which could make the trip unpleasant. This type of anxiety often involves "what if" scenarios that weigh heavily on parents' minds, including worries that the child might refuse to participate, have a tantrum in public, or feel distressed due to disruptions in their routine. In many cases, anticipatory anxiety is compounded by previous experiences, such as past instances of tantrums or overstimulation during trips, prompting parents to anticipate and plan for every possible challenge. This type of anxiety influences initial travel decisions, including the choice of destination, mode of transportation, departure time, and logistical preparations aimed at minimizing stress for the child.

2. Situational Anxiety: Occurs While at the Tourist Destination

Situational anxiety emerges during the trip when unexpected circumstances arise. Even meticulously planned trips can be disrupted by real-world events that parents cannot predict. Examples include traffic jams, extreme weather, long queues, excessive noise, or schedule changes that deviate from the original plan. These situations can trigger distress in children with ASD, which in turn increases emotional pressure on parents. In such cases, parents must adapt quickly and make immediate decisions, such as finding alternative routes, postponing activities, or adjusting schedules to ensure their child remains comfortable. Situational anxiety highlights the importance of parental flexibility and mental preparedness in maintaining the well-being of both the child and the family during travel.

3. Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is related to parents' concerns about being judged or negatively perceived by others when their child exhibits unpredictable behaviors in public. Children with ASD may suddenly cry, scream, refuse

interaction, or have tantrums, which can attract attention and provoke criticism or disapproval. Social anxiety influences not only how parents manage the trip but also their emotional state during travel. Parents often try to hide their stress, limit interactions with strangers, or choose less crowded destinations to reduce exposure to social scrutiny. This form of anxiety demonstrates that the social dimension of parental concern is deeply intertwined with psychological stress and their sense of responsibility as caregivers.

In terms of comfort, parents highlighted three primary factors that improved positive tourism experiences: organized itineraries, low-sensory settings, and adaptable activity timing. Well-structured schedules assisted children in looking forward to future events, alleviating emotional strain. Locations featuring serene environments and regulated sensory input were viewed as more welcoming. Moreover, flexible setups that permitted breaks and adjustments to the child's needs played a crucial role in enhancing parental satisfaction. These results indicate that comfort relates to predictability, sensory management, and flexible planning

The results indicate that safety regarding family tourism involving children with ASD ought to be redefined as a multifaceted concept. In contrast to traditional tourism models that focus on physical facilities and risk mitigation, parents in this study viewed safety as a location's capacity to support emotional control and mental well-being. This resonates with phenomenological viewpoints expressed by Jonathan A. Smith, highlighting the comprehension of lived experiences influenced by processes of meaning-making. Safety, consequently, encompasses more than just physical security and also involves sensory and emotional safeguards.

The rise of anticipatory, situational, and social anxiety underscores the ongoing psychological deliberation required in making travel choices. Parents continuously evaluate risks before and during travel activities. This discovery shows that the involvement of families with ASD in tourism is affected by both environmental accessibility and emotional readiness. Therefore, managing tourism safety must include proactive communication, pre-visit information, and organized activity planning to minimize uncertainty.

As indicated by the results, comfort is essentially associated with predictability and responsive environmental design. The significance of organized timetables and sensory-friendly spaces reinforces the inclusive tourism concepts proposed by Darcy & Buhalis (2011), who contend that accessibility should go beyond physical amenities to encompass experiential inclusivity. In this research, comfort was described not just as pleasure, but as the harmony between environmental cues and the sensory-emotional traits of children with ASD.

The study suggests that tourism environments accommodating autism should encompass three interconnected aspects: structural predictability, sensory modulation, and temporal flexibility. Structural predictability reduces

uncertainty, sensory modulation prevents overstimulation, and temporal flexibility enables adaptive pacing tailored to personal requirements. By tackling these aspects at the same time, tourism providers can develop settings that are both accessible and emotionally sustainable for families with ASD. This conceptual synthesis enhances the analytical input of the research by connecting empirical results with wider discussions on inclusive tourism.

The results further emphasize the essential function of parental involvement in managing tourism activities for children with ASD. Parents proactively anticipate potential stressors, develop coping strategies, and modify plans as needed. This corresponds with research by Wood et al. (2017), highlighting that parents of children with ASD serve as key supporters in navigating environmental and social difficulties during recreational activities. Their active involvement transforms what could be a stressful task into a manageable, fulfilling family adventure.

Furthermore, the interaction between safety and comfort underscores their interrelatedness and mutual benefit. For instance, predictable settings lessen anxiety and increase comfort, whereas sensory-friendly areas boost emotional security and contentment. This connection implies that tourism providers should adopt a comprehensive design strategy, integrating safety and comfort rather than treating them separately. This viewpoint broadens the inclusive tourism framework to encompass emotional and psychological aspects beyond accessibility alone.

The study additionally shows that social factors are a crucial aspect of tourism experiences for families with ASD. Crowd situations, unexpected encounters, or inexperienced personnel can lead to increased anxiety, which may restrict involvement. Consequently, educating tourism personnel on ASD awareness, using social story resources, and establishing quiet areas are effective methods to reduce social stressors. These interventions embody the principles outlined by Darcy and Cameron (2010), promoting inclusive tourism practices that address social, physical, and sensory barriers.

Regarding policy implications, the research indicates that local governments and tourism agencies might create autism-friendly certifications or guidelines for locations and attractions. These initiatives would demonstrate understanding and willingness to support families with ASD, enhancing both confidence and engagement. Moreover, specific pre-visit details such as visual schedules and sensory maps can provide parents and children with preparatory resources, reducing uncertainty and improving overall satisfaction.

From a theoretical perspective, the research enhances comprehension of how experiential inclusivity can be implemented in tourism studies. By connecting empirical findings on parental views to ideas of predictability, sensory modulation, and temporal flexibility, the study enhances understanding of how inclusive tourism can address cognitive and emotional requirements, in addition to physical access. This showcases originality by emphasizing psychological and sensory aspects as essential to tourism planning for underserved communities.

Ultimately, these results underscore the necessity for additional empirical investigation of autism-inclusive tourism in various cultural and geographical settings. Although this research focused on Bandung, Indonesia, various areas may present distinct sensory, social, and logistical challenges. Broadening research to encompass larger samples and longitudinal methodologies would enhance the applicability of suggestions and offer more profound understanding of effective inclusive tourism strategies.

The findings of this study indicate that parents' perceptions of safety and comfort during tourism activities with children with ASD form an integrated evaluation framework in the travel decision-making process. These two aspects are not understood as separate dimensions, but rather as interrelated considerations in determining whether a destination is appropriate and feasible to visit.

Safety, in this context, is not only defined as protection from physical risks but also as the ability of the tourism environment to minimize stressors for children. Noise, crowds, excessive lighting, changes in routine, and the potential for social judgment from others are major concerns for parents. Therefore, safety is more accurately understood as the perception of environmental controllability, namely the extent to which parents feel able to anticipate and manage the possibility of overstimulation or unexpected emotional responses. The stability of a child's emotional regulation is a key indicator of whether a tourism experience is perceived as safe.

Meanwhile, comfort relates to the degree of alignment between the design of the tourism activity and the sensory, emotional, and social needs of children with ASD. Parents tend to feel comfortable when activities have a clear structure and schedule, take place in a non-overstimulating environment, and provide flexibility in timing and rhythm. Comfort, therefore, can be understood as an adaptive fit between destination characteristics and children's needs.

Conceptually, the tourism participation of families with autistic children is determined by a destination's ability to address two main issues: reducing potential risks and providing adaptive support for the child's specific needs. When the tourism environment offers predictability, sensory sensitivity, and operational flexibility, parental anxiety is reduced, and the opportunity for a positive tourism experience increases. Therefore, developing autism-friendly tourism should not solely focus on physical accessibility; it should also prioritize emotional regulation, sensitive environmental design, and social acceptance as the primary foundations of inclusivity.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that parents of children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) perceive tourism activities primarily through the lenses of safety and comfort. Safety concerns include parental anxieties related to sensory sensitivities, disruptions in routine, and social interactions, encompassing anticipatory, situational, and social anxieties. Comfort relates to the availability of

environments that accommodate the child's sensory, emotional, and social needs. Parents preferred tourism activities with clear structures, predictable itineraries, spaces free from overstimulation, and flexibility to adapt to their child's needs.

This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on parental perceptions in tourism contexts for children with ASD, highlighting the importance of autism-friendly tourism practices that have been underexplored in previous research.

The novelty of this research lies in its in-depth exploration of the perceptions of parents of children with ASD in Bandung regarding safety and comfort aspects of tourism activities. It identifies the forms of parental anxiety (anticipatory, situational, and social) and emphasizes the sensory dimension as a key factor in tourism comfort. This research expands the concept of inclusive tourism beyond mere physical accessibility to a more holistic approach based on the psychological, emotional, and sensory needs of children with ASD in the context of a developing country.

This research's contributions are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this study expands the concept of inclusive tourism from its traditional focus on physical accessibility to a more holistic approach that encompasses the psychological, emotional, and sensory needs of children with ASD. These findings emphasize that inclusivity is not achieved solely through the provision of physical facilities, but must also consider predictable activities, sensory-sensitive environmental design, and a supportive social climate. Practically, the results of this study provide an empirical basis for developing autism-friendly tourism strategies in developing countries, particularly Indonesia, by emphasizing the importance of enhancing the capacity of tourism service providers to understand neurodiversity characteristics. Thus, this study not only fills a gap in the literature but also offers a direction for implementation that is more responsive to the needs of families with children with ASD.

However, this study has several limitations: it relies on a small number of informants, focuses on a specific geographic area, and relies on qualitative self-reported experiences, which may not fully represent all families with children with ASD. Future research could expand the sample size, include diverse locations, and employ mixed methods to validate and generalize the findings.

Based on the results, practical recommendations include: designing tourism environments with sensory-friendly spaces; providing structured and flexible itineraries; training tourism staff in ASD awareness; and developing guidelines for family-centered autism-friendly tourism activities. Implementing these strategies can enhance participation, reduce parental anxiety, and create more enjoyable and inclusive family tourism experiences.

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