



The Impact of Caring for Children with Special Needs on Maternal Subjective Well-being: A Bibliometric Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The literature on Maternal Subjective Well-being (MSW) has grown rapidly over the past two decades. MSW is a multidimensional construct encompassing subjective evaluations of mothers' lives, including overall life satisfaction, happiness, and emotional well-being. **Method:** A systematic literature review was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases to identify English-language articles published between 2013 and 2023 using the keywords mother, subjective well-being, and special needs children, yielding 2,200 records, of which 8 met the inclusion criteria and were subsequently analyzed using the PRISMA framework and thematic synthesis approach. **Results:** The review identified eight eligible studies and found that maternal subjective well-being is influenced by both internal factors (self-efficacy, hope, positive perceptions, and resilience) and external factors (social support, family functioning, and partner relationships). The findings highlight that strengthening psychological resources and social support systems may play a key role in improving the well-being of mothers caring for children with special needs. **Novelty:** The review highlights resilience as a key protective factor that can mitigate the negative effects of parenting stress on maternal subjective well-being and quality of life among mothers of children with disabilities. A notable research gap is the limited understanding of how protective factors, particularly resilience and benefit finding, can be developed and activated to support positive maternal adaptation to caregiving demands.

INTRODUCTION

The number of children with special needs is on the rise, and the majority of them live with their families. Family members, especially mothers, are the primary caregivers for these children. It is estimated that 80% of children with special needs are cared for by their mothers (Brekke & Alecu, 2023). The responsibility of caring for children with special needs is both challenging and rewarding. Mothers of these children are at an increased risk of experiencing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. In addition, they may experience physical health issues such as headaches, back pain, and fatigue. Caring for children with special needs may also have a negative impact on mothers' subjective well-being.

Subjective well-being is a broad concept that encompasses a person's overall assessment of their life and their emotional experiences. It is commonly assessed using life satisfaction, happiness, and positive and negative affect. Subjective well-being is a key component of a good quality of life. It is positively associated with better physical and mental health and negatively associated with health-risk behaviors. Despite the importance of maternal subjective well-being, there is a lack of research exploring the impact of caring for children with special needs on maternal subjective well-being. This

literature review aimed to identify and synthesize the existing research on the impact of caring for children with special needs on maternal subjective well-being. The review was guided by the following research questions: What is known about the impact of caring for children with special needs on maternal subjective well-being? What factors are associated with maternal subjective well-being? What strategies are used to promote maternal subjective well-being? (Papadopoulos, 2021).

In the last few decades, the number of children with special needs has been increasing. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines children with special needs as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, together with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. This definition includes children with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and those who are at risk of developmental delays. Caring for children with special needs is a challenging task for parents, especially for mothers. Studies have shown that mothers of children with special needs experience more stress than mothers of typically developing children. They have poorer mental health and lower subjective well-being (SWB), and they are less satisfied with their lives than mothers of typically developing children. SWB is defined as a cognitive and affective evaluation of one's life. The cognitive evaluation refers to overall life satisfaction, whereas the affective evaluation refers to the balance between positive and negative feelings.

The increasing number of children with special needs across countries has led to a growing need for long-term care in the family setting, with approximately 80% of primary caregiving responsibilities falling on mothers (Kudo, 2024; Vo & Fong, 2025). Several studies have shown that mothers caring for children with special needs experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than mothers of typically developing children (Andrioni et al., 2022; Findling et al., 2023). In addition to facing greater physical and emotional demands, they often experience limited time for social, work, and recreational activities, which can lead to decreased subjective well-being (SWB) and quality of life. However, factors that contribute to maintaining or improving maternal subjective well-being, such as resilience, social support, and positive perceptions of caregiving, remain poorly understood (Bi et al., 2022; Guo & Li, 2025; Yayla et al., 2026). This condition indicates the need for more in-depth studies to identify factors that influence maternal subjective well-being as a basis for developing effective interventions for families with children with special needs.

The maternal subjective well-being of mothers of children with disabilities is a multifaceted construct that encompasses their psychological, emotional, and social well-being (Ayoola et al., 2025; Dempsey et al., 2016; Kachroo et al., 2023). The well-being of mothers of children with disabilities is a topic of growing interest in the research literature, as the number of children with disabilities is increasing (WHO, 2018). The well-being of mothers of children with disabilities is also a topic of importance in the field of nursing, as mothers of children with disabilities are a vulnerable population who experience high levels of distress (Martinez-Marti et al., 2010). The purpose of this

literature review is to examine the impact of caring for children with disabilities on maternal subjective well-being. A literature review is a comprehensive and critical evaluation of the existing literature on a specific topic (Munn et al., 2018). A literature review is a type of research that synthesizes the findings from multiple studies and identifies patterns, themes, and areas of agreement and disagreement in the literature (Wang et al., 2020).

Maternal subjective well-being (SWB) is how mothers evaluate their lives. For two primary assumptive reasons, SWB is typically operationalized in research as a multifarious or multidimensional phenomenon. The phrase in this sentence might be difficult or inaccurate, so think about changing it. First, a global life satisfaction judgment integrates a model widely used by SWB researchers. Supporting the first strand is the main focus; the Subjective Well-being (SWB) component includes (a) cognitive element (i.e., life satisfaction judgment) and (b) affective element (i.e., feeling). They are closely related and significantly influence one another. According to existing literature, caring for children with a disability or chronic condition can have a negative influence on the subjective well-being (SWB) of the person. Compared with fathers, mothers spend more time on informal caregiving. Therefore, the emotional, physical, and social challenges experienced by primary caregivers may be greater. In general, mothers are more involved in child rearing and comforting their children than fathers, which is particularly pronounced in the case of children with a disease. Additionally, mothers often experience more parenting stress than fathers, with many attributing this to frequent maternal involvement in childcare.

The top five most common and distressing 'caring' tasks were all activities of daily living, which accounted for 16% of all caring activities provided. It was concluded that it is crucial to support mothers, who are the main caregivers, by improving their time use, especially their leisure opportunities. Caregivers of children with developmental disabilities can experience more parenting stress than those caring for children without developmental disabilities. The workload and sensory processes in the household, including negotiating and planning, communicating, and a lack of predictability, may exacerbate the stress these mothers experience. In addition to the children's emotional difficulties, their mothers also have a higher divorce rate, anger control problems, and struggles with mental health. In particular, it is crucial to accurately identify the factors influencing the subjective well-being of mothers of special children, as this will be the first step in supporting these mothers and their children.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Agrawal et al., 2024; Dominic et al., 2022; Lintangesukmanjaya et al., 2025). Data collection was conducted through a literature search in the PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases for English-language articles published between 2013 and 2023, using

the keywords mother, subjective well-being, and special-needs children. Of the 2,200 identified articles, a screening process was conducted using inclusion and exclusion criteria, with the removal of duplicates, irrelevant articles, and non-empirical publications. After going through the identification, screening, and eligibility assessment stages, eight articles were obtained that met the criteria for further analysis (Gloy et al., 2022). The extracted data included the title, author, year of publication, methodology, abstract, and main findings of the research, which were then systematically synthesized to identify factors influencing subjective well-being among mothers of children with special needs (Goldan et al., 2022; Widyanti et al., 2025). The SLR design used in the research is shown in Figure 1 below.

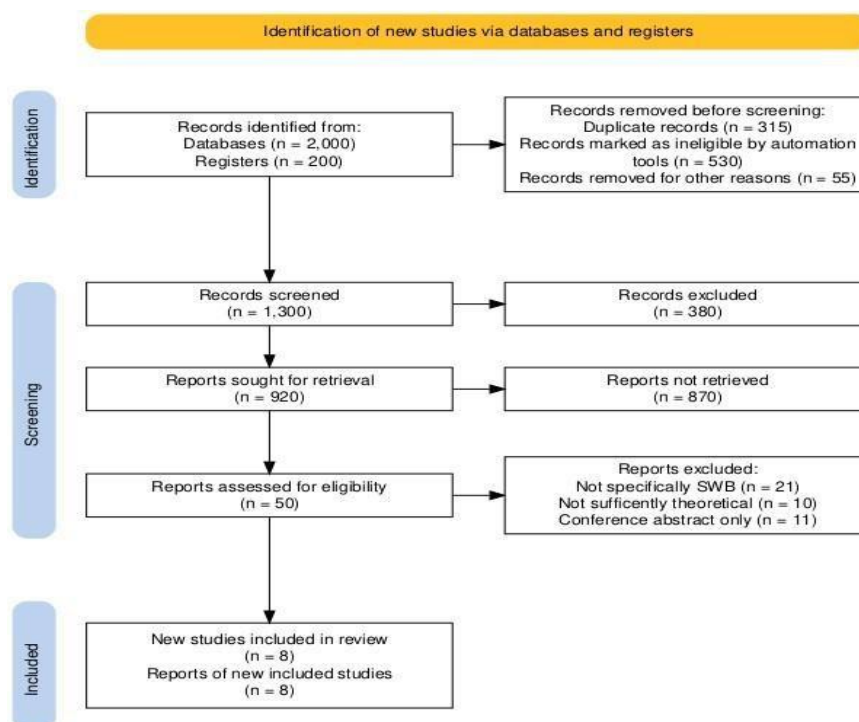


Figure 1. Flowchart of the systematic literature research

Systematic yet broad searches of the literature were conducted using the following electronic databases: PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search was limited to English-language articles published between 2013 and 2023. The search yielded 2200 articles, of which 8 met the inclusion criteria. Predefined inclusion criteria included articles with the following key factors: (i) Population: mother with special needs children and databases: PubMed, Scopus, Google scholar; (ii) studies: quantitative; literature review; observational studies (e.g., cohort, cross sectional, casecontrol) as well as qualitative studies (interviews); and (iii) published in English; (iv) published prior to 2013-2023 Nonempirical articles (such as abstracts, and editorials), dissertations, and thesis papers were omitted. To extract data, an Excel file was created. The following features were extracted: Title, Authors, DOI link, Year, Abstract summary, Summary, Methodology, and Main findings. The following key terms were used: mother, subjective well-being, and special-needs children. The search strategy is displayed in Table 1. The

search was limited to titles or abstracts, as without them, it became too broad. For each database, the search strategy was changed to generate the desired papers (Pessin et al., 2022). The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist was used to complete this review (Figure 1).

A database search was conducted on August 16, 2024. The preliminary findings were stored in the EndNote citation manager and integrated into one file. Duplicates records (n = 315), records marked as ineligible by automation tools (n = 530), and records removed for other reasons (n = 55) were removed before screening. The Researcher screened the titles and abstracts of the identified papers for relevance (Chigbu et al., 2023; Herrmann et al., 2024). The complete texts of papers deemed "relevant" for the review were then obtained and compared with our inclusion criteria. Reports assessed for eligibility (n = 50). Reports excluded: (i) Not specifically SWB (n = 21); (ii) Not sufficiently theoretical (n = 10); (iii) Conference abstract only (n = 11). Previously, the search yielded 2200 articles, of which 8 met the inclusion criteria. The following key terms were used: mother, subjective well-being, and special-needs children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quality results papers

The quality of the included papers was evaluated using a methodology specifically devised for this review, given their heterogeneity. From Figure 1, the obtained results are shown. When it comes to studying maternal subjective well-being, and even more narrowly, the impact of caring for children with additional needs (special needs or disabilities), a range of methodologies have been reported (Baldwin et al., 2025; Estinfort et al., 2022). The qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews is by far the most popular (Banha et al., 2022; Dengel et al., 2022). Some of these studies involved parents of children with additional needs exclusively, and for some, both mothers and fathers were studied. Sometimes, within the same paper, mothers and fathers were studied together, and then separately. Although a wide variety of interview topics have been used in these qualitative studies, some central themes have become established in feminist research on maternal well-being (Davis et al., 2024). Are the deficiencies of the child the mother's fault? Does she dislike that child? How are the caring responsibilities divided between the couple? What are the attitudes of the public towards both mother and child? Results from the interviews examining the relationship between shame and support reflected some of these assumptions.

Caring for children with special needs (CWSN) is a challenging task that can affect maternal subjective well-being. Maternal subjective well-being is a multidimensional construct that includes emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. It is an important aspect of women's health and can affect their quality of life, functioning, and coping with stress. The prevalence of CWSN is rising due to the increase in survival rates of children with serious congenital disorders and the increase in the number of children with developmental disorders (Sur & Sarkar, 2025; Wang et al., 2020).

Research on the subjective well-being (SWB) of parents of children with special needs reveals several key factors influencing their experiences. Hope, particularly the 'agency' component, significantly predicts and fosters parental SWB (Shennar-Golan, 2017). Spirituality indirectly influences SWB through resilience, leading to greater life satisfaction and positive affect (Dey & Amponsah, 2020). Parenting self-efficacy is positively correlated with SWB among mothers of children with special needs (Fatima & Suhail, 2019). Social support, especially perceived availability of support and satisfaction with support, acts as a protective factor for SWB (Fatima & Suhail, 2019; Huang & Zhang, 2022). Other contributing factors include gratitude, emotional control, mindful parenting, and self-compassion (Andayani et al., 2021). Occupational experiences, particularly pleasure and restoration levels, are associated with positive affect and life satisfaction (Hsieh & Ling Lo, 2013). However, individual differences exist: some parents experience positive SWB, while others struggle with acceptance and satisfaction (Wijayanti, 2015).

The mothers of CWSN have to take care of their children's health, education, and daily needs. They also have to manage their children's behavior and cope with the stigma associated with disability. The mothers of CWSN are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and stress than mothers of typically developing children. They also have to deal with the lack of support from their husbands, family, and society. The mothers of CWSN often feel isolated and lonely, and must sacrifice their personal and social lives for their children. The impact of caring for CWSN on maternal subjective well-being is not well understood. Most studies in this field of parent well-being in the context of chronic childhood impairments involve surveys with a variety of questionnaires or structured or unstructured interviews with caregivers. A few studies have used qualitative methods, and some studies have used mixed methods. Most studies have used quantitative methods and focused on the impact of caring for CWSN on maternal mental health. There are very few studies that have focused on the impact of caring for CWSN on maternal subjective well-being.

The family's ability to cope over time in caring for a child with a learning disability is complicated by extraneous factors, primarily the degree of the disability, the extent of challenging behavior, and the availability of support (Lakhani et al., 2025). Some now argue that the negative effects of a child with a learning disability on other family members are quite minor and that behavioral difficulties are of much greater significance, particularly in terms of parental psychological well-being. There is a growing literature regarding the complex role of carers of learning disabled children in relation to gender, the tensions within advocacy, and the social consequences. This shows the diverse range of issues that affect parents, and in particular, mothers and women of children with learning disabilities (Franklin et al., 2022).

The complexity of the burden on the mother, in terms of managing multifactorial expectations, has only received the research attention it deserves over the previous two decades. The impact of a child with a disability on family life, and in particular the mother, may be uncompromising, particularly in creating feelings of self-blame, guilt,

depression, helplessness, and hopelessness, with generally heightened levels of stress and physical exhaustion (Sarman & Tuncay, 2024). These effects, however, are counter-balanced by the recognition of the benefits gained from caring in adverse circumstances, rising to the challenge, coping effectively, and deriving satisfaction from successfully overcoming difficult and enduring family conditions. Caring can result in reduced conflict and enhanced cohesiveness, whilst others point to life-enhancing possibilities, long-term caring facilitating empowerment through the acquisition of expertise, skills, and confidence. The literature on Maternal Subjective Well-being (MSW) has been growing rapidly over the past two decades.

MSW is a multidimensional construct encompassing subjective evaluations of mothers' lives, including overall life satisfaction, happiness, and emotional well-being. MSW is a key component of maternal health and is important for mothers' quality of life and their children's well-being. A range of factors, including education, employment, marital status, and psychological well-being, can influence MSW. Mothers' caregiving experiences also influence MSW. Mothers of children with special needs (CSN) often experience high levels of stress and low levels of well-being. The higher levels of stress can be attributed to the demands of caregiving, the impact of their children's disabilities on their lives, and the stigma associated with having a CSN. Lower levels of well-being can be attributed to higher levels of stress (Chen et al., 2022).

The impact of caregiving on mothers' well-being has been described as a "double-edged sword" because, while caring can be a source of stress, it can also be a source of satisfaction. Mothers of CSN report high levels of satisfaction with their caregiving roles. The impact of caregiving on mothers' well-being is also influenced by mothers' individual characteristics and the broader social context. Mothers' coping strategies can mediate the impact of caregiving on mothers' well-being. Coping strategies can be classified as problem-focused or emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping strategies aim to address the problem, while emotion-focused coping strategies aim to manage the emotional response to it. Problem-focused coping strategies are generally considered to be more effective than emotion-focused coping strategies.

Self-efficacy, hope and positive perception of the child's disability also contribute to increased SWB

Self-efficacy, hopefulness, belonging, and positive perception are traits that might serve as protective factors, enabling parents, especially mothers, to attain a balanced level of subjective well-being (Barcaccia et al., 2023; Cummins, 2010). Being in a coupled relationship enables parents to distribute physical, mental, and emotional burdens, thereby mitigating potential adverse effects on subjective well-being and facilitating a more balanced state of homeostasis (Candeiaes et al., 2024; Sarason et al., 1990). The bibliometric visualization is shown in Figure 2 below.

developmental disabilities. The workload and sensory processes in the household, including negotiating and planning, communicating, and a lack of predictability, may exacerbate the stress these mothers experience. In addition to the children's emotional difficulties, their mothers also have a higher divorce rate, anger control problems, and struggles with mental health. In particular, it is crucial to accurately identify the factors influencing the subjective well-being of mothers of special children, as this will be the first step in supporting these mothers and their children.

Mother emotional

Much of this experience is associated with intense emotional challenges. Mothers' bitterness stems from feeling alienated, having their needs preempted or shattered; normal child compensation mechanisms are either non-existent or dysfunctional (i.e., punishment instead of rewards reinforces undesired behavior), expelling them from the so-called "motherhood league", demanding more mothering rather than less, replaying their early lives, or undermining their familial strength. The full acceptance of their child's limitations also involves a range of mixed emotions. The relationship between mother and well-being in line literature can be seen in Figure 3.

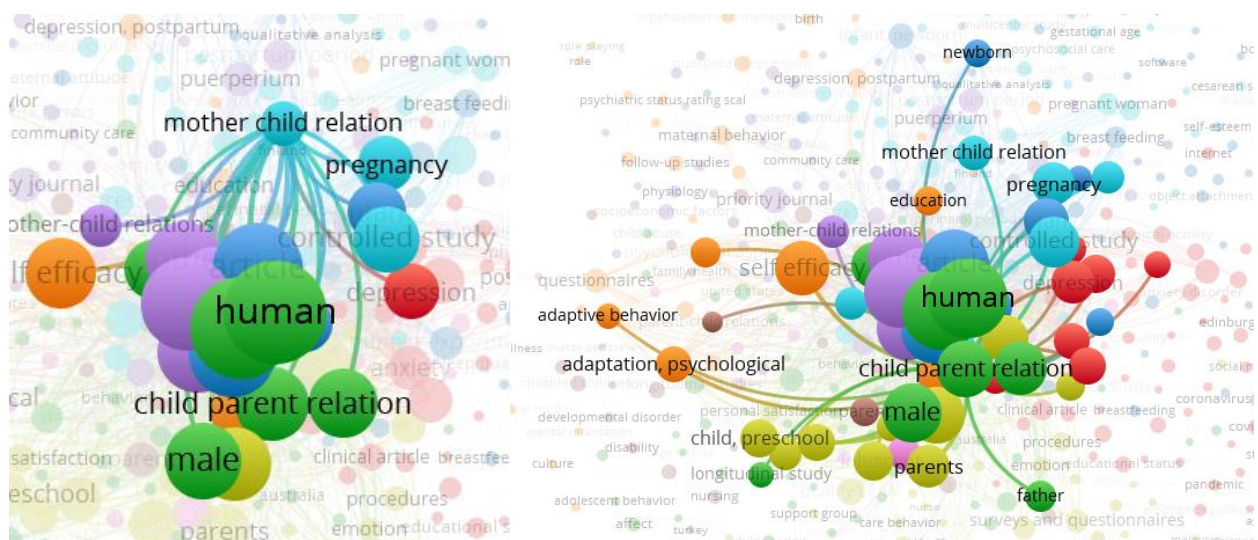


Figure 3. Mother and well-being in line literature

Emotional stress is probably the first impact in terms of psychological capital (Molgora et al., 2020). It appears that families also need to develop the cognitive and affective coping mechanisms that allow them to exhibit resilience (Vlasdislav et al., 2024). Unfortunately, very little data are available on the personal or familial factors that contribute to fostering positive development or, conversely, mitigate the risk of negative outcomes related to the caring of children with developmental problems. Most mothers undergo chronic stress reactions. These reactions vary widely in their manifestation and include mental, social, and cognitive or emotional distress, difficulties in communication, and having distorted beliefs about the child (e.g., stigma of blame or beliefs in non-

acceptance); mothers have been reported in high percentages of atypically developing children.

Social support and family functionality

Family members are usually the most important group of supporters of mothers of children with special needs. Grandparents, and especially grandmothers, are probably the key family members who provide support. Sibling support can also encourage mothers. Sibling support can take the form of family decision-making, cooking, initial spiritual care for the brother or sister, and sharing family expenses. Fathers' support usually does not extend beyond familial settings. It is quite rare to see fathers attending to the activities of children with special needs (Staunton et al., 2023).

Intervention to improve maternal subjective well-being

Therapeutic interventions aim to reduce symptoms of distress and improve overall mood or emotional regulation in the mothers of children with chronic health conditions. Interventions with a group of mothers focus on the sharing of common experiences and feelings as a means of mutual support. Facilitated group discussions provide opportunities for problem-solving among the mothers and between them and the facilitator. Support groups for parents of children with special needs can be self-help or facilitated discussion groups (Kemp et al., 2026). In self-help groups, the parents themselves determine the meeting's course, choose topics, and provide mutual support.

In general, counseling can help to relieve symptoms of stress and alleviate burden and psychological distress in the mothers of children with special needs. It focuses on the client's cognitive and emotional reactions to life stressors. Within many of these therapeutic approaches, researchers and practitioners have emphasized the inclusion of cognitive-behavioral techniques, such as the provision of psychoeducation, cognitive restructuring, problem-solving training, and stress management, that seek to address or treat the symptoms of the clinical population of mothers. Moreover, research in the field suggests that expedited, evidence-based therapeutic interventions may be useful, especially in the early days post-diagnosis.

Intervention to improve maternal subjective well-being

According to Milton et al. (2023), promoting social and personal skills in children with special educational needs can indirectly enhance parental well-being. Besides that, therapeutic interventions for mothers are also important to reduce symptoms of distress and improve overall mood and emotional regulation in the mothers of children with chronic health conditions. Interventions with groups of mothers focus on sharing common experiences and feelings as a means of mutual support (Yamashinta et al., 2022). Facilitated group discussions provide opportunities for problem-solving among the mothers and between them and the facilitator. Support groups for parents who have children with special needs can be self-help or a facilitated discussion group. In self-help

groups, the parents themselves determine the meeting's course, choose topics, and provide mutual support (Smythe et al., 2020).

In general, counseling can help to relieve symptoms of stress and alleviate burden and psychological distress in the mothers of children with special needs (Abdelaziz et al., 2024). It focuses on the client's cognitive and emotional reactions to life stressors. Within many of these therapeutic approaches, researchers and practitioners have emphasized the inclusion of cognitive-behavioral techniques, such as the provision of psychoeducation, cognitive restructuring, problem-solving training, and stress management, that seek to address or treat the symptoms of the clinical population of mothers. Moreover, research in this area suggests that expedited, evidence-based therapeutic interventions may be useful, especially in the early days post-diagnosis (Soldato et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2026).

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This review highlights the impact of caring for children with special needs on mothers' subjective well-being. Available evidence suggests that, as a group, women who fulfill this role face greater demands. Furthermore, they have more difficulties in finding benefits or rewards within the context of their relationships with their children with disabilities than is the case for mothers of children who are developing typically. Research interested in uncovering future ways to mitigate some of these potential negative effects is required. **Implication:** There is tentative evidence that the degree of parenting stress has the greatest impact on maternal subjective well-being and quality of life. Given that variables associated with greater caregiving demand are also commonly associated with higher perceived stress, interventions that might reduce caregiving-associated stress warrant exploration. Resilience was one of the protective psychological factors demonstrated to mitigate the impact of higher maternal stress on subjective well-being and quality of life. **Limitation:** This research is limited by its relatively small number of studies and predominantly cross-sectional design, making it unable to describe changes in maternal subjective well-being longitudinally. Furthermore, the mechanisms by which protective factors such as resilience and benefit finding improve subjective well-being require further investigation. **Future Research:** More research is encouraged to explore how protective factors that promote positive maternal adaptation to the caregiving role, such as resilience and benefit finding, may be activated. Furthermore, more research that follows mothers longitudinally and includes fathers is necessary for a more sophisticated understanding of the impact of caring for a child with special needs on maternal subjective well-being, and to detect any family protective or buffering factors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Alice Zellawati led the research and manuscript writing. **DYP. Sugiharto** processed and analysed bibliometric data. **Mulawarman** performed data validation and discussion. **Sunawan** supported the literature search, reference compilation, and final editing. All authors approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest, either financial or personal, that could influence the content or results of this study.

ETHICAL COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

This article has met the standards of research and publication ethics. The author affirms that this research is original, conducted with academic integrity, and free from unethical practices, including plagiarism.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AI OR DIGITAL TOOLS IN WRITING

The final responsibility for the content of the manuscript rests entirely with the authors. The author declares that this manuscript was prepared entirely without the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI) or other digital tools. The entire process, from planning, data processing, analysis, to writing and editing the manuscript, was carried out manually by the author. Thus, full responsibility for the content and authenticity of this article rests solely with the author.

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