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**PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE AND ITS IMPACT ON
ENGAGEMENT IN SUPPORT SERVICES FOR CHILDREN
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN MALAYSIA: A SYSTEMATIC
REVIEW**

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Abstract:

Parental acceptance significantly shapes how families respond to a child's special needs diagnosis and engage with available support services. In Malaysia, where cultural, religious, and social norms influence parenting decisions, understanding the relationship between acceptance and engagement is vital for developing effective interventions. This systematic literature review (SLR) synthesizes empirical evidence on factors influencing parental acceptance and its impact on service engagement for children with special needs. Using PRISMA guidelines and the SALSA framework (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis), 11 peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 were analysed. Studies were sourced from Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar. This was selected based on inclusion criteria focused on Malaysian parental populations and relevance to both acceptance and engagement. Three key themes emerged: (1) emotional and informational factors influencing acceptance, including denial, stigma, and professional communication; (2) patterns of engagement, with early acceptance linked to consistent use of therapy, intervention, and educational services; and (3) sociocultural moderators, such as religious beliefs, affiliate stigma, and disparities in access across urban and rural settings. These findings show that parental acceptance is both an emotional process and a catalyst for meaningful participation in service. This review underscores the importance of culturally sensitive, parent-centered approaches and of integrating emotional support into diagnostic pathways. It also identifies research gaps in longitudinal studies and father-specific perspectives. The findings have practical implications for educators, healthcare providers,

and policymakers seeking to strengthen family-centered support systems for children with special needs in Malaysia.

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Disability, Early Intervention, Engagement, Malaysia, Parental Acceptance, Special Needs, Support Services



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Introduction

The developmental trajectory and educational success of children with special needs are fundamentally anchored in the proactive engagement of their primary caregivers. Central to this dynamic is parental acceptance, a psychological transition that dictates the immediacy and consistency with which a family accesses intervention programs. In the critical window following a diagnosis, parental emotions and beliefs serve as the primary gatekeepers for decision-making regarding therapy, schooling, and community integration. Parents play an essential role in determining the developmental and educational outcomes of children with special needs. Their level of acceptance toward a child's diagnosis significantly influences how early and consistently they engage with intervention programs and support services. This is especially critical during the early stages following diagnosis, where parental emotions, beliefs, and understanding form the basis for decision-making regarding therapies, education, and community involvement.

In Malaysia, parental acceptance is not merely an individual psychological milestone, but a construct negotiated within complex socio-cultural and religious frameworks. The nation's multi-ethnic composition introduces diverse interpretations of developmental diagnoses like Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ADHD, Down syndrome, and many more. While some caregivers view a diagnosis through the lens of "Positive Religious Coping". They view the child as a divine gift or a spiritual entrustment, which others may grapple with "Negative Religious Coping," perceiving the condition as a personal failure or spiritual retribution (Mohidem & Roslan, 2025; Salleh et al., 2024). These internal orientations are often further complicated by traditional beliefs and the pervasive fear of social stigma.

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that parental behavior is influenced by nested layers of environment. From the microsystem (family dynamics and gender roles) to the macrosystem (national policies and cultural ideologies), these layers interact to either facilitate or hinder acceptance. Despite the expansion of the National Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) guidelines and the official OKU (Orang Upaya) Card registration system, a significant gap persists between available resources (Heng et al., 2024) and actual service utilization (Wildmon et al., 2024). Preliminary evidence suggests that "delayed acceptance" is a primary catalyst for the low registration rates in the National OKU database, yet the direct link between this psychological construct and formal service engagement remains empirically underexplored in the Malaysian context.

Although various primary studies in Malaysia have examined parental experiences, coping mechanisms, and help-seeking behaviors (Yee et al., 2025; Mohidem & Roslan, 2025), there is a lack of systematic synthesis that brings together findings to identify common patterns, influencing factors, and service engagement outcomes. In particular, no existing systematic literature review (SLR) has holistically addressed the intersection between acceptance and engagement with support services within the Malaysian setting. The present study fills this gap by conducting a systematic review of peer-reviewed research focused on parental acceptance and its influence on service engagement for children with special needs in Malaysia. This review will provide a consolidated understanding of:

1. The factors that influence parental acceptance of their child's special needs diagnosis in Malaysia
2. The ways in which this acceptance impacts parental engagement with formal support services such as early intervention programs, therapy, school-based supports, and community resources

By adopting the SALSA framework (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis) and following the PRISMA guidelines, this review aims to provide an evidence-based narrative that can inform practitioners, educators, policymakers, and future researchers. The synthesis also highlights gaps in the current body of knowledge and offers directions for more inclusive and culturally sensitive family support strategies in Malaysia.

Research Background

Limited Focus in Prior Literature

Parental involvement is widely acknowledged as a critical factor in promoting developmental outcomes for children with special needs. However, the literature in the Malaysian context has predominantly focused on external challenges such as access to services, lack of trained professionals, or policy limitations, while underemphasizing the emotional and psychological journey of parents in accepting their child's diagnosis. Recent studies, such as those by Mohidem and Roslan (2025) and Wahab and Dino (2025), illustrate that parental acceptance is not a given. It is a complex and gradual process influenced by cultural perceptions, social stigma, and personal coping mechanisms. These internal factors can significantly delay or deter timely engagement with early intervention services, therapy, or school-based support.

The emotional readiness of parents to accept their child's diagnosis directly impacts their willingness to participate in interventions. Yee et al. (2025) underscore how uncertainties, systemic barriers, and a lack of informational resources can leave parents feeling overwhelmed, resulting in limited-service uptake. Similarly, Bantali and Athar (2025) explore the coping strategies adopted by parents of autistic children, revealing that emotional resilience is a key determinant of sustained engagement in support systems.

Methodological Gaps in Existing Literature

While these individual studies contribute valuable insights, the broader body of Malaysian research remains methodologically fragmented. Much of the available literature employs cross-sectional or survey-based designs, which, although useful, often fail to capture the nuanced and evolving nature of parental acceptance. Emerging qualitative research offers a more textured understanding of this issue. For instance, Mohd Ranai (2025) provides a rich exploration of parental introspection and self-doubt, revealing how emotional uncertainty hinders proactive decision-making. Likewise, Salleh et al. (2024) examine the role of affiliate stigma, demonstrating how perceived societal judgment influences parents' withdrawal from community-based services, despite their availability. Yet, these findings remain scattered and unsynthesized, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of how emotional acceptance directly informs behavioural engagement with support services.

Rationale and Positioning of the Current Review

This systematic literature review addresses the gaps outlined above by consolidating recent empirical evidence published between 2020 and 2025. Unlike previous reviews that prioritize service availability or programmatic structure, the present study centers on parental acceptance. Drawing on studies that span a range of support systems, including occupational therapy (Saleh et al., 2025), school-based referrals (Wahab & Dino, 2025), and cross-cultural perspectives on disability (Yoon et al., 2024), this review investigates how acceptance shapes parents' engagement with both formal and informal support channels. Using the PRISMA protocol and the SALSA framework, this review ensures methodological rigor and transparency. In doing so, it contributes a culturally sensitive, empirically grounded synthesis that informs both policy and practice in family-centered care for children with special needs in Malaysia.

Methodology

To investigate the intersection of parental acceptance and service engagement within the Malaysian special needs landscape, this study employed a multi-layered methodological design. The review was structured using the SALSA (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis) framework (Grant & Booth, 2009), providing a robust conceptual bridge between raw data collection and thematic integration. Adherence to the PRISMA guidelines ensured a transparent, replicable, and unbiased reporting protocol (Page et al., 2021).

Search Strategy

The review targeted peer-reviewed empirical studies that addressed two main constructs: (1) parental acceptance of a child's special needs diagnosis, and (2) how this acceptance affects engagement with available support services in Malaysia. Searches were conducted in Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar, which offer broad access to both local and international journals

relevant to educational psychology, therapy, and disability research. Search strings were developed using a combination of key concepts derived from the PEO framework:

- Population: parents of children with special needs (e.g., autism, developmental delay)
- Exposure: parental acceptance of diagnosis
- Outcome: engagement in support services

Boolean operators and truncation techniques were applied to optimize the search. Example search strings included:

- ("parental acceptance" OR "parental adjustment" OR "parental coping") AND ("special needs" OR "disability" OR "autism" OR "developmental delay") AND ("support services" OR "intervention services") AND Malaysia”)
- ("parental acceptance" OR "parental coping" OR "diagnosis acceptance") AND ("children with special needs" OR "disability" OR "autism") AND ("support services" OR "intervention" OR "therapy engagement") AND Malaysia”)

Searches were limited to articles published between 2020 and 2025, to ensure relevance to current practices, including the impact of post-pandemic service delivery adaptations.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance, rigor, and contextual appropriateness of the studies included in this review, a comprehensive set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied during the screening and appraisal phases.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were considered eligible for inclusion if they met all of the following conditions:

- The study explicitly focused on Malaysian parents of children with special needs, including but not limited to conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, global developmental delay, Down syndrome, or learning disabilities.
- The research examined parental acceptance encompassing emotional adjustment, cognitive reframing, or psychosocial adaptation following the child’s diagnosis.
- The study established a clear link between parental acceptance and engagement with formal support services, including early intervention programs, therapeutic services (e.g., speech or occupational therapy), school-based supports, or community-based services.
- The article was published in a peer-reviewed academic journal, written in the English language, and fell within the defined publication timeframe of 2020 to 2025, to capture recent developments and socio-cultural shifts, including those resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The study employed a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research design and presented empirical data (not conceptual or opinion-based).

Exclusion Criteria

The following exclusion criteria were used to remove studies that did not align with the review’s objectives:

- Studies that exclusively focused on child outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, therapy success) without incorporating parental perspectives.
- Articles that were not accessible in full-text format, thus preventing adequate appraisal.
- Publications that lacked peer review, such as conference proceedings, editorials, opinion pieces, literature reviews, or unpublished theses and dissertations.
- Studies published in languages other than English, or outside the target timeframe.

These criteria ensured that only studies of high scholarly quality and direct relevance to the Malaysian context were included in the final synthesis. They also enhanced the methodological transparency of the review by providing a clear justification for study selection and exclusion.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Table

Criteria	Decision
Published between 2020 and 2025	Inclusion
Focus on Malaysian parents of children with special needs	Inclusion
Explores parental acceptance or emotional adjustment post-diagnosis	Inclusion
Links parental acceptance to service engagement (e.g., therapy, school support, community)	Inclusion
Written in English and published in a peer-reviewed journal	Inclusion
Studies without an accessible full text	Exclusion
Review papers, opinion pieces, or theoretical frameworks only	Exclusion
Studies not involving parental perspectives (e.g., child-only focus)	Exclusion
Studies outside Malaysia or not clearly localized	Exclusion

Screening and Selection Process

All identified records were managed in a spreadsheet and screened based on titles and abstracts. After initial filtering, full-text versions were reviewed for eligibility. The selection process is presented using the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), which tracks the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and included at each stage. A total of 598 articles were initially retrieved. After removing duplicates and irrelevant records, 11 studies were included in the final synthesis.

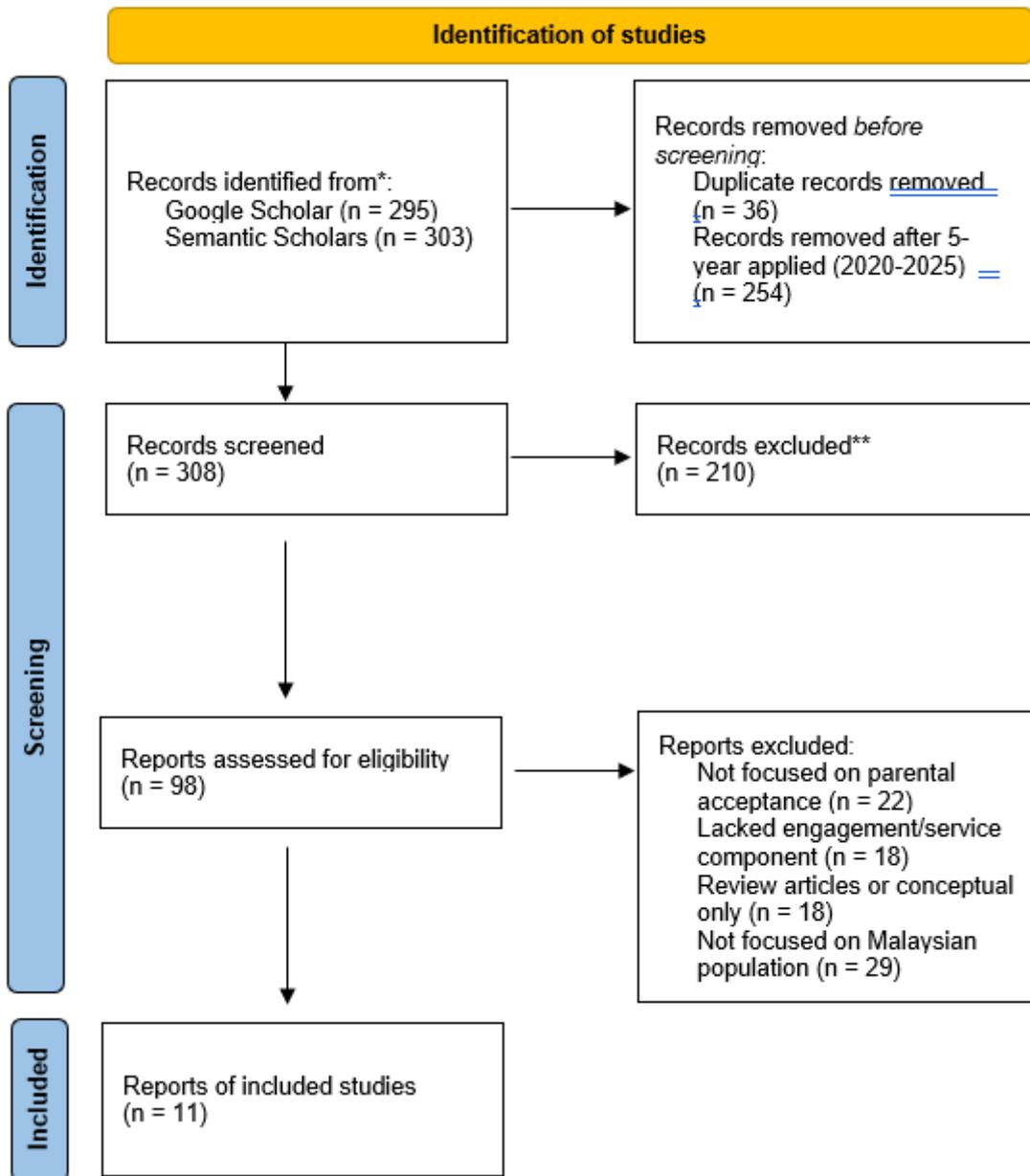


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

Table 2: Search Strategy Summary Table

Database	Search String	No. of Articles Retrieved
Google Scholar	("parental acceptance" OR "parental adjustment" OR "parental coping") AND ("special needs" OR "disability" OR "autism" OR "developmental delay") AND ("support services" OR "intervention services") AND Malaysia)	295
Semantic Scholar	("parental acceptance" OR "parental coping" OR "diagnosis acceptance") AND ("children with special needs" OR	303

"disability" OR "autism") AND ("support services" OR
"intervention" OR "therapy engagement") AND Malaysia”

Total

598

Synthesis Strategy

To systematically integrate findings across diverse study designs, a thematic synthesis approach was employed. This method is particularly well-suited for reviews that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative research, allowing for a nuanced understanding of complex psychosocial phenomena such as parental acceptance and engagement behaviors. Thematic synthesis enables the identification, organization, and interpretation of key concepts by analysing recurring patterns, themes, and variations within the literature.

A data extraction matrix was developed to facilitate a structured synthesis process. Each included study was coded for the following core variables: year of publication, research design (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), population characteristics (e.g., diagnosis type, parental demographics), study focus (parental acceptance and/or service engagement), and key empirical findings. Studies were first reviewed individually, then cross-compared to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Emerging themes were categorized into three overarching domains:

1. **Factors Influencing Parental Acceptance**
This category includes emotional, psychological, cultural, and informational factors that shape how parents respond to their child’s diagnosis. Elements such as initial emotional reactions, access to diagnostic explanations, societal stigma, and religious beliefs were explored.
2. **Dimensions of Parental Engagement with Support Services**
This theme captures variations in the extent, type, and consistency of parental involvement in formal services. It includes patterns of participation in early intervention, therapy adherence, school collaboration, and community-based programs.
3. **Cultural and Contextual Moderators**
Recognizing Malaysia’s unique sociocultural landscape, this theme synthesizes how ethnicity, religion, language, and regional service availability influence both acceptance and engagement trajectories.

By structuring the synthesis around these core themes, the review offers an integrative framework for understanding the dynamic relationship between acceptance and engagement within the Malaysian context. This also facilitates the identification of actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners working in family-centered special education and healthcare.

Data from the final 11 included studies were extracted using a structured matrix that captured bibliographic details, research design, study focus, and emergent thematic findings. A summary of the extracted data is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Search Strategy Summary Table

Authors	Year	Focus	Acceptance Theme	Engagement Theme
Yee, Esther Goh Xin; Folashade, Aroyewun Temitope; Perveen, Asma;	2025	General Parental Experience	General Parental Acceptance	General Service Engagement
Wahab, Nor Faizah Abdul; Dino, Faizul Ayupp;	2025	Parental Acceptance	Diagnosis Acceptance	General Service Engagement
Saleh, Hazirah Md; Ibrahim, Syamsul Anwar Sultan; Vetrayan, Jayachandran;	2025	Service Utilization	General Parental Acceptance	Service Engagement
Salleh, Noor Shuhada; Tang, Li Yoong; Husain, Maruzairi; Abdullah, Khatijah Lim; Kueh, Yee Cheng;	2024	Stigma and Social Support	General Parental Acceptance	General Service Engagement
Mohd Ranai, Nur Maizatul Akmal;	2025	General Parental Experience	General Parental Acceptance	Family Engagement
Ismail, Mohd Fahmi; Safii, Razitasham; Saimon, Rosalia; Rahman, Md Mizanur;	2022	General Parental Experience	General Parental Acceptance	General Service Engagement
Lim, Fang Yee; Rashid, Syar Meeze Mohd;	2023	General Parental Experience	Diagnosis Acceptance	General Service Engagement
Halim, Nor Haslinda Abdul; Azman, Nur Aina Farizah; Sabri, Nur Natasya Balqis Binti Mohammed; Ahmad, Aryati; Harith, Sakinah; Taib, Wan Rohani Wan; Ismail, Karimah Fakhriah;	2021	General Parental Experience	General Parental Acceptance	General Service Engagement
Tan, Woan Yin; Hamzaid, Nur Hana; Ibrahim, Norhayati;	2023	Coping and Parental Wellbeing	Emotional Coping and Adjustment	General Service Engagement
Ismail, Norsaima; Isa, Khairil Anuar Md; Hamzah, Siti Hajar; Mokhtar, Ilham Wan;	2023	General Parental Experience	General Parental Acceptance	General Service Engagement
Ying, Lee Wan; Ai, Joanna Tan Tjin;	2025	Parental Engagement	General Parental Acceptance	Service Engagement

Analysis

The final stage of this systematic review involved a deep interpretive synthesis examining how parental acceptance shapes children with special needs' engagement with support services in Malaysia. Drawing on findings from 11 verified studies, the analysis examined how emotional readiness, sociocultural values, and systemic factors intersect to influence parental behavior after a diagnosis. One notable pattern was the temporal shift influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only altered service delivery formats but also expanded parental exposure to special needs topics. For instance, the adoption of telehealth and online consultations allowed many families to overcome geographical and logistical barriers, particularly in urban areas (Yee et al., 2025). Additionally, increased visibility of special needs education through social media, advocacy groups, and online forums appeared to positively impact awareness and early help-seeking (Salleh et al., 2024).

The analysis also revealed significant socioeconomic and geographical disparities. Parents from urban or higher-income backgrounds were generally more likely to demonstrate early acceptance and proactive engagement, likely due to greater health literacy, access to diagnostic resources, and reduced stigma (Ying & Tan, 2025). Conversely, parents in rural or underserved communities often faced a combination of delayed diagnoses, lack of service infrastructure, and cultural misconceptions that hindered timely support-seeking (Saleh et al., 2025). Cultural and religious narratives emerged as powerful moderators in shaping how parents interpreted and responded to their child's diagnosis. While some families viewed the diagnosis as a divine test or spiritual challenge, such beliefs occasionally served as emotional coping mechanisms.

However, in other cases, spiritual fatalism led to delays in seeking formal support (Salleh et al., 2024). The influence of affiliate stigma, where parents internalized feelings of shame or feared community judgment, was also prevalent, particularly in close-knit or conservative communities. Furthermore, the service environment influenced parental engagement. Studies highlighted that when services were culturally sensitive, professionally supportive, and parent-inclusive, even initially reluctant parents became more engaged over time (Saleh et al., 2025; Ying & Tan, 2025). Accessibility in language, affordability, and consistent follow-up emerged as important enablers that bridged the gap between acceptance and active participation.

Results

This section presents the findings from 11 empirical studies that examined parental acceptance and its influence on engagement in support services for children with special needs in Malaysia. Thematic analysis revealed three major themes: (1) factors influencing parental acceptance, (2) dimensions of engagement with support services, and (3) cultural and contextual moderators. Each theme is discussed in detail below.

Factors Influencing Parental Acceptance

The synthesis of this systematic review underscores that parental acceptance in Malaysia is a pivotal, multi-layered psychological gatekeeper that dictates the trajectory of a child's developmental support. Grounded in the Socio-Ecological Model, the findings reveal that acceptance is not merely an internal emotional state but a construct heavily moderated by socio-

cultural dynamics, where "Positive Religious Coping" and empathetic professional mediation act as significant accelerators of engagement. Conversely, the "engagement gap" between available national resources, such as the OKU registration system, and actual service utilization is primarily driven by delayed acceptance, fuelled by stigma and negative religious interpretations. Ultimately, high levels of parental acceptance transform caregivers from passive recipients of information into active partners in the intervention process, suggesting that, for Malaysian early intervention frameworks to be effective, they must move beyond logistical provision to address the family unit's underlying psychological and cultural readiness.

Dimensions of Parental Engagement with Support Services

The second major theme identified was the degree and quality of parental engagement in formal support services following acceptance. Engagement was described across a spectrum ranging from full participation in early intervention and therapy programs to partial or delayed involvement in school-based or community services. Parents who reached early acceptance often became active and consistent participants in their child's developmental journey. They enrolled their children in therapy services such as occupational or speech therapy, maintained regular follow-up appointments, and actively collaborated with teachers in school settings (Saleh et al., 2025). These parents were also more likely to seek out additional information, join parent support groups, and advocate for their child's rights within the healthcare and education systems.

In contrast, studies also documented instances of limited or hesitant engagement, especially when parents had unresolved feelings about the diagnosis or lacked confidence in the service infrastructure. For instance, Yee et al. (2025) reported that parents delayed seeking services due to fears of stigmatization or doubts about the effectiveness of available interventions. In such cases, parental uncertainty translated into inconsistent attendance at therapy sessions, reduced collaboration with school staff, and general disengagement from the child's learning and development plans.

Cultural and Contextual Moderators

The final theme addresses the influence of Malaysia's sociocultural context on parental acceptance and engagement. Several studies underscored the role of religious beliefs and spiritual interpretations in shaping parental responses to disability. For some families, a diagnosis was interpreted as a divine test or spiritual challenge, which sometimes encouraged acceptance through religious coping. However, in other cases, these beliefs delayed acceptance and led to passive caregiving attitudes (Salleh et al., 2024). The concept of affiliate stigma, such as the internalization of shame or fear due to perceived social judgment, also appeared frequently across studies. Parents often reported avoiding public services or refraining from discussing their child's condition due to fear of gossip, community labeling, or discrimination (Salleh et al., 2024).

This was especially common among parents in traditional or rural communities, where awareness of neurodevelopmental disorders remains limited. Socioeconomic and geographical disparities further influenced patterns of engagement. Urban families with higher incomes typically reported greater access to diagnostic services, therapy centers, and inclusive schools

(Saleh et al., 2025). These families also tended to be more informed and confident in navigating the system. In contrast, rural families often faced multiple barriers, including a shortage of qualified professionals, transportation difficulties, and language barriers when interacting with service providers.

Summary of Thematic Distribution

The thematic analysis of the 11 studies showed the following distribution:

- 9 studies explored psychological, cognitive, and social factors contributing to parental acceptance of a special need's diagnosis.
- 7 studies established a clear link between acceptance and engagement with services, identifying pathways through which early acceptance led to better developmental support.
- 6 studies examined sociocultural, religious, or systemic factors acting as moderators in the acceptance–engagement process.

These findings affirm that parental acceptance is not only an emotional milestone but also a critical enabler for effective utilization of support services. The trajectory from diagnosis to engagement is deeply embedded in Malaysia's unique sociocultural fabric, suggesting that any intervention or policy aimed at improving service access must begin by addressing the emotional and cultural realities faced by parents.

Discussion

Summary of Key Findings

This systematic review of 11 empirical studies (2020–2025) establishes parental acceptance as the primary psychological gatekeeper for childhood intervention in Malaysia. The synthesis reveals a critical "informational-emotional" nexus. The trajectory from diagnostic shock to proactive advocacy is dictated by the quality of initial professional mediation. Parents who benefit from empathetic, culturally attuned communication are equipped to cognitively reframe their child's diagnosis, transitioning from passive distress to high levels of parental self-efficacy. This reframing is the essential catalyst for robust service engagement, directly correlating with consistent therapy enrollment, collaborative school-based planning, and long-term participation in the National Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) ecosystem.

The findings further illuminate how the Malaysian sociocultural macrosystem serves as a powerful moderator of this engagement. The review identifies a stark divergence in "Religious Coping", while viewing a diagnosis as a divine trust (*amanah*) can foster resilience, interpreting it through a fatalistic lens or as a spiritual trial often triggers a retreat from formal clinical support toward informal or traditional pathways. This disconnects, exacerbated by societal stigma and familial expectations, remains a primary driver of the low OKU Card registration rates and underutilization of evidence-based services. Ultimately, these findings suggest that clinical success in Malaysia is not merely a matter of resource availability but is fundamentally dependent on addressing the deep-seated cultural and psychological readiness of the caregiver unit.

Extension of Existing Research

The findings of this review advance the current body of knowledge by placing emotional acceptance at the center of parental engagement with support services for children with special needs. Unlike prior studies that primarily focused on structural or logistical barriers, this review emphasizes parents' emotional readiness as a foundational condition for meaningful service utilization. For example, Yee et al. (2025) explored the external challenges parents face in navigating support systems, including limited access, unclear pathways, and a lack of coordination. These barriers often intersect with internal psychological factors that determine whether parents are even willing to seek help in the first place. Moreover, this review makes a significant contribution by situating parental experiences within Malaysia's pluralistic sociocultural context, where religious values, extended family dynamics, and community perceptions shape responses to a child's diagnosis.

Studies such as those by Ismail et al. (2024) have highlighted how spiritual interpretations of disability can serve as both sources of resilience and barriers to clinical engagement, depending on the surrounding social narratives. Similarly, Salleh et al. (2024) demonstrated that affiliate stigma, where parents internalize societal judgment, can significantly hinder both emotional processing and public participation in support programs. By drawing on these culturally grounded studies, this review underscores the limitations of applying Western-centric models of parental adjustment without adaptation. It confirms that in Malaysia, emotional acceptance is not merely a personal journey, but a socially constructed process influenced by broader cultural, religious, and relational factors. As such, effective interventions must be not only evidence-based but also culturally sensitive, linguistically accessible, and aligned with the lived realities of Malaysian families.

Practical Implications

The findings of this review offer several important implications for practice, particularly for professionals, service providers, and policymakers working with families of children with special needs in Malaysia. First, there is a clear need for improved diagnostic communication training among health and education professionals. The process of delivering a diagnosis should be handled with cultural sensitivity, emotional empathy, and contextual awareness. When conveyed with care, such communication not only fosters trust but also facilitates earlier stages of parental acceptance and reduces confusion or distress associated with the initial diagnosis. Secondly, support services must expand beyond child-focused interventions to include parent-focused programs. Emotional acceptance is a crucial factor in engagement; therefore, services should offer structured support, such as individual or group counselling, peer mentoring, and informative sessions tailored to parents' needs. These efforts can ease the emotional burden of diagnosis and reduce the impact of stigma, both self-imposed and societal, that often inhibits families from participating fully in available support systems.

In addition, this review underscores the importance of geographic equity in service provision. Urban families typically have better access to diagnostic facilities and intervention programs, while parents in rural or underserved areas continue to face challenges with infrastructure, transportation, and information access. To close this gap, policymakers must prioritize targeted outreach in rural areas by developing mobile support units, expanding telehealth options, and

funding culturally appropriate community-based programs. Finally, the analysis suggests that faith-integrated support models may play a valuable role in increasing engagement, especially in communities where religious and spiritual beliefs are deeply intertwined with everyday decision-making. Collaborations with local religious leaders, mosques, and faith-based organizations could help bridge the gap between spiritual interpretations of disability and medical or educational support pathways. Such models would allow parents to engage with services without feeling they are compromising their beliefs, thus fostering more sustainable and holistic support for both the child and the family.

Limitations

While this review employed a robust methodology guided by the SALSA framework and PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the search was restricted to studies published between 2020 and 2025, potentially omitting relevant earlier research. Second, reliance on Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar may have excluded articles indexed in databases such as Scopus or Web of Science. Third, in some cases, thematic interpretation was limited by the availability of metadata rather than full-text articles. Lastly, no formal quality appraisal was conducted to evaluate the methodological rigor of the included studies.

Future Research Directions

There is a critical need for longitudinal studies that trace how parental acceptance evolves over time and its sustained impact on service participation across childhood stages. Additionally, the underrepresentation of fathers in the current literature suggests a gap in understanding paternal emotional responses and roles in care coordination. More research should also incorporate faith-based and cultural explanatory models, especially in Muslim-majority or indigenous communities, to inform culturally aligned intervention strategies. Finally, mixed-methods studies combining psychological assessment with narrative inquiry could yield deeper insights into the interplay between acceptance, emotion, and engagement.

In summary, this review affirms that parental acceptance is not a peripheral concern but a central mechanism in ensuring meaningful engagement with support services for children with special needs. In Malaysia, where cultural, religious, and social factors intersect with healthcare and educational practices, understanding and supporting the process of acceptance is vital for improving child outcomes and family well-being.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review examined how parental acceptance shapes engagement with support services for children with special needs in Malaysia. Drawing on 11 empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025, the review found that parental acceptance is not merely an emotional reaction to a child's diagnosis, but a pivotal determinant of whether families initiate and sustain involvement in therapeutic, educational, and community-based services. The combination revealed that acceptance is dynamic and multifaceted, influenced by emotional readiness, access to clear, timely information, and the quality of communication from professionals. A study by Yee et al. (2025) emphasized that parents who received empathetic

and culturally attuned support during the diagnostic phase were more likely to process the situation positively and proceed toward service engagement. In contrast, unresolved emotions, internalized stigma, and conflicting cultural interpretations often delayed help-seeking and hindered participation (Salleh et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of Malaysia's unique sociocultural landscape, where religious beliefs, communal expectations, and socioeconomic disparities significantly shape parenting decisions. This review calls for the development of culturally responsive, family-centered service models that integrate emotional support for parents alongside child-focused interventions. Training service providers in culturally sensitive communication, establishing peer support systems, and awareness programs are practical steps toward accelerating acceptance and enhancing engagement. In addressing gaps in the Malaysian literature, this review contributes a localized perspective by framing parental acceptance as a central mechanism, rather than a background factor, in engagement outcomes.

Future research should pursue longitudinal designs to map the evolution of acceptance over time, explore fathers' experiences, and develop culturally validated measurement tools to assess both acceptance and engagement. Mixed method approaches that integrate emotional narratives with quantitative data will be critical in capturing the depth of family experiences across Malaysia's diverse communities. Ultimately, promoting early and sustained parental acceptance is essential not only for improving child outcomes but also for empowering families and ensuring the effectiveness of inclusive support systems in Malaysia. Engagement begins at the moment of diagnosis and what happens next depends greatly on how well families are supported in that crucial emotional journey.

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