

Religious Coping in Parenting Special Needs: Insights from Islamic Teachings

Zati Nazifah Abdul Rahim

Fakulti Pengajian Quran dan Sunnah, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

Noornajihan Jaafar

Fakulti Pengajian Quran dan Sunnah, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

Abstract

This study explains the religious coping in parenting special needs children (SNC), focusing on insights from Islamic teachings. It aims to understand how Islamic principles and practices can support parents in managing the unique emotional and psychological challenges associated with raising SNC. A qualitative approach was employed through document analysis, analyzing contemporary research articles on religious coping, and relevant verses from *Qur'an* and *Hadith*. The findings indicate that religious coping, rooted in Islamic teachings, significantly contributes to emotional regulation. Three key Islamic concepts, namely, *ṣabr* (patience), *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), and *ihtisāb* (seeking reward) are validated as pivotal in helping individuals manage their emotions. This research bridges the gap between Islamic religious teachings and the psychological needs of parents raising SNC by highlighting the effectiveness of these religious practices in maintaining healthy and positive emotional well-being.

Keywords: Religious Coping, Special Needs Children, Parenting

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1. INTRODUCTION

Coping strategies from the perspectives of religion which termed as ‘religious coping’ can be defined as “the use of cognitive or behavioral strategies based on religious beliefs or practices” (Abraido-Lanza et al., 2004). Carver et al. (1989) describes religious coping as a way of finding comfort, support, and direction from a higher power, either through established religious practices or through personal spiritual beliefs. In short, religious coping involves using strategies based on religious beliefs and practices which offer various ways to manage life’s challenges through faith. In terms of Islamic religious coping, it can be concluded as the use of Islamic beliefs, practices, and principles to manage and overcome stress, challenges, and adversities, drawing upon the teachings of Islam.

The theoretical foundation of religious coping lies in integrating psychological coping styles with essential dimensions of religion, offering a proactive approach to managing conflicts involving religion (Heyden & Mona, 2021). The concept of religious coping encompasses a variety of strategies that individuals use to manage stress. These strategies can be broadly categorized into two components (Gull & Husain, 2020). The first component is internal, involving the pursuit of knowledge, spiritual experiences, and personal faith. The second component is external, encompassing support from social, professional, and institutional sources. However, addressing on emotion-focused coping which can be categorized in the first component, involves utilizing Islamic principles and reflecting on Islamic teachings. These practices help individuals manage emotional distress by fostering a sense of inner peace (Rahmanawati et al., 2022), thus integrating faith into the process of coping with emotions.

Religious coping strategies are particularly relevant in the context of special needs parenting, where the demands on parents are continuous and often intense. Heyden and Mona (2021) propose that religious coping serves multiple functions to manage conflicts by providing emotional, factual, and interpretive strategies. These functions provide parents with special needs children (SNC) with a sense of purpose, support, and guidance, which are crucial during challenging times. Within this

framework, Islamic religious coping refers to the use of three Islamic principles namely *ṣabr* (patience), *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), and *ihtisāb* (seeking reward from Allah), in the context of parents with SNC. These three Islamic principles are central to the spiritual resilience of parents, enabling them to endure the emotional and psychological challenges of raising SNC by reframing suffering as a test, trusting in divine wisdom, and anticipating eternal reward for their sacrifices. This synthesis is supported by various verses from *Qur'ān* and *ḥadīth* which will be thoroughly discussed in this research.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Religious coping with parenting special needs has been commonly studied because parents with SNC use emotional coping strategies more often than parents with normal children (Paster et al., 2009). Numerous empirical studies have shown that religious coping helps individuals with a variety of personal or collective pressures and it has been evaluated closely in relation to depression and anxiety (Bryan et al., 2016). However, there is limited research concerning religious coping in an Islamic context (Rahmanawati et al., 2022), particularly insights from Islamic teachings based on literature sources as proposed in this study.

Following this discussion, it is recommended to conduct comprehensive research based on literature review focusing on Islamic teachings. This study's findings are primarily based on literature review and focusing on Islamic coping mechanisms, which may not be directly applicable to other religious or secular perspectives. Additionally, the reliance on literature sources rather than empirical data from parents with SNC limits the scope of the findings and the applicability of the results. However, this study offers an insight on how Islamic coping mechanisms can be systematically utilized to enhance emotional resilience and well-being, contributing to the wider discussion on religious coping and special needs parenting.

3. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to understand how Islamic principles and practices can support parents in managing the unique emotional and psychological challenges associated with raising SNC. Applying qualitative approach in meeting the objectives of this study also seeks to validate three key Islamic concepts that contribute to effective coping strategies for parenting SNC, which are *ṣabr* (patience), *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), and *ihtisāb* (seeking reward).

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative method, emphasizing thematic analysis to extract key concepts related to religious coping in parenting SNC. To review the available literature in this area, a search of Journal databases such as Scopus, ProQuest Central, and Sage Journals are utilized with specified search keywords and search string to retrieve both recent and future studies. The keywords used are (religious coping + special needs children OR disabled children + parenting + Islam). Contemporary and Islamic research articles related with religious coping and parenting SNC are selected. These selected articles then undergo a data extraction process which focuses on three main parts in the articles, namely abstract, research findings and discussion.

5. FINDINGS

Islamic religious coping offers various approaches to manage stress in parenting SNC through faith-based practices and principles. However, there are three key Islamic concepts that contribute to effective coping strategies for parenting SNC, which are *ṣabr* (patience), *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), and *ihtisāb* (seeking reward) which will be validated through this discussion. These three principles

can be regard as the keys because providing a comprehensive framework for coping with life's challenges by aligning emotional responses with Islamic teachings.

5.1 Patience in facing trials (*Ṣabr*)

Muslims are taught the significance of *ṣabr* and the reliance on Allah's help when facing challenges (Rahmanawati et al., 2022). This virtue is especially vital for parents of SNC, who often endure emotional pain, grief, and depression upon learning of their child's diagnosis (Uddin & Ashrafun, 2023). The initial disappointment stems from the loss of the idealized image of a 'perfect' child, and the realization that their child may not develop according to typical societal expectations (Rahmanawati et al., 2022). Hence, although they may eventually accept their child's condition, the grief remains.

Daily struggles such as managing tantrums—frequent crying, screaming, and self-harming behaviors—further test the emotional endurance of parents (Che Mud et al., 2021). These behaviors, when persistent and intense, can lead to emotional exhaustion and even moments of parental regret or loss of control. Yet, Islam encourages believers to remain steadfast, as reflected in the verse from *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, which promises glad tidings to those who are patient in the face of trials.

﴿ وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ ﴿١٥٥﴾ ﴾

« And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits but give good tidings to the patient. » [*Qur'an*, 3:155]

Since everything belongs to Allah and everything in this world is temporary, including suffering, hence *ṣabr* is considered a crucial virtue for Muslims (Rusdi, 2017) as implied in the verse. In families with SNC, behavioral or emotional issues affect not only the children but also other family members, particularly the parents. To address this, Islamic values serve as the foundation for therapy, where parents are guided to practice *ṣabr* in accepting their child's condition (Meiza et al., 2019). Madi et al. (2019) highlight in their study that practicing value of *ṣabr* within the family, significantly influence their acceptance.

Moreover, the physical, emotional, and mental fatigue experienced by parents due to the constant demands of caregiving (Tharshini et al., 2016) is another area where *ṣabr* becomes essential. Practicing patience helps parents accept their child's condition as a divine trust, fostering a sense of spiritual resilience and purpose. By patiently accepting the child's presence as a trust granted by Allah, parents embrace this blessing as both a responsibility and a religious duty as narrated in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*:

{ حَدَّثَنَا أَبِي سَعِيدٍ الْخُدْرِيُّ . رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ . أَنَّ نَاسًا مِنَ الْأَنْصَارِ سَأَلُوا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَأَعْطَاهُمْ، ثُمَّ سَأَلُوهُ فَأَعْطَاهُمْ، حَتَّى نَفَدَ مَا عِنْدَهُ فَقَالَ "مَا يَكُونُ عِنْدِي مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَلَنْ أَدْخِرُهُ عَنْكُمْ، وَمَنْ يَسْتَعْفِفْ يُعِفَّهُ اللَّهُ، وَمَنْ يَسْتَغْنِ يُغْنِهِ اللَّهُ، وَمَنْ يَتَصَبَّرْ يُصَبِّرْهُ اللَّهُ، وَمَا أُعْطِيَ أَحَدٌ عَطَاءً خَيْرًا وَأَوْسَعَ مِنَ الصَّبْرِ." }

« Narrated Abī Sa'īd Al-Khudrī: Some *Ansār* persons asked for (something) from Allah's Messenger ﷺ and he gave them. They again asked him for (something), and he again gave them. And then they asked him, and he gave them again till all that was with him finished. And then he said "If I had anything. I would not keep it away from you. (Remember) Whoever abstains from asking others, Allah will make him contented, and whoever tries to make himself self-sufficient, Allah will

make him self-sufficient. And whoever remains patient, Allah will make him patient. Nobody can be given a blessing better and greater than patience. » [Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book of Zakat, Ḥadīth no. 1469]

This ḥadīth is deeply explored in the major *sharḥ* works as it emphasizes that *ṣabr* is not merely a passive trait, but a divine gift cultivated through conscious effort and spiritual resilience. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī in *Fath al-Bārī* explains that this ḥadīth shows how patience is a means of divine support and the most expansive form of provision a believer can receive. It highlights *ṣabr* as a divine gift that is cultivated through sincere effort and spiritual discipline. He notes that the phrase “Allah will make him patient” implies that patience is not merely a natural trait but a divinely granted strength that increases with intentional practice and reliance on Allah. He also emphasizes that *ṣabr* is the foundation of moral and spiritual resilience, especially in times of deprivation or hardship (Ibn Ḥajar, 1990).

Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī in *‘Umdat al-Qārī* highlights that the Prophet’s generosity was followed by moral instruction, teaching that true wealth lies in contentment and restraint. Al-‘Aynī elaborates that the Prophet’s repeated giving to the Anṣār, followed by his counsel on self-restraint and patience, teaches that material generosity must be balanced with spiritual instruction. He interprets the ḥadīth as a call to internalize *qanā‘ah* (contentment) and to recognize that true wealth lies in the heart, not in possessions (al-‘Aynī, n.d.). The emphasis on *ṣabr* here is not just about enduring hardship but about choosing restraint and dignity over dependency.

Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Qaṣṭallānī in *Irshād al-Sārī* further elaborates that *ṣabr* encompasses all aspects of life—worship, hardship, and moral discipline—and is a path to divine closeness. He adds that the Prophet ﷺ’s declaration of *ṣabr* being the best and most expansive gift, reflects its comprehensive role in all aspects of life—from worship and obedience to enduring trials and avoiding sin (al-Qaṣṭallānī, n.d.). He connects this to the Quranic theme that Allah is “with the patient,” indicating that *ṣabr* is not only a virtue but a means of divine companionship and support as stated in his commentaries:

“Patience is among the greatest gifts because it helps one endure hardships. Through it, a servant is able to fulfill obligations and avoid prohibitions. It is a means to salvation and success.”

The classical scholars’ insight into this ḥadīth deeply resonates with the lived experiences of parents with SNC. It is a reality that mirrors the daily perseverance of these parents as they navigate emotional, physical, and social challenges. Through their enduring care and love, these parents embody a form of spiritual excellence. For parents of SNC, *ṣabr* is not only a coping mechanism but a sacred trust and a means of drawing closer to Allah, transforming their trials into a source of divine reward and inner strength. Their patience is not unnoticed, but rather, it is a divine endowment, a source of spiritual elevation, and the greatest gift they can receive in their journey of caregiving and love.

5.2 Trust in Allah’s plan (*Tawakkul*)

Tawakkul, or placing complete trust in Allah’s plan, plays a crucial role in enhancing emotional well-being among parents of SNC. (Nurul, Ery, & Huda, 2023). Many parents experience anxiety about their child’s future, especially when contemplating who will care for them after their passing (Mohamad et al., 2019; Uddin & Ashrafun, 2023). This uncertainty can be overwhelming, but *tawakkul* encourages parents to surrender their worries to Allah, trusting that He will provide and

protect. *Tawakkul* encourages parents to accept their circumstances, which can lead to improved emotional resilience.

Parents who practice *tawakkul* often report better coping mechanisms, which are linked to greater emotional resilience and reduced stress (Pachița & Gherguț, 2023). Besides, internal factors such as hope, gratitude, and spiritual beliefs, which are integral to *tawakkul*, significantly contribute to the subjective well-being of parents. Ervina et al. (2023) proposes that these factors can lead to a more positive outlook, reducing feelings of anger and disappointment often experienced by parents with SNC. *Tawakkul* helps mitigate those negative feelings and replacing them with a sense of peace and acceptance.

Parents also face the challenge of not knowing how to support their children effectively, particularly when it comes to learning specialized communication and behavioural strategies (Ismail & Ali, 2020; Rahmanawati et al., 2022). This learning curve can be daunting, but *tawakkul* helps parents maintain hope and emotional balance, knowing that Allah’s wisdom encompasses all things.

﴿وَيَرْزُقُهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَحْتَسِبُ وَمَنْ يَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ فَهُوَ حَسْبُهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بَالِغُ أَمْرِهِ قَدْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدْرًا ﴿٣﴾﴾

« And will provide for him from where he does not expect. And whoever relies upon Allah – then He is sufficient for him. Indeed, Allah will accomplish His purpose. Allah has already set for everything a decreed extent. » [Qur’ān, 65:3]

This verse from *Sūrah al-Talāq* reflects the principle of *tawakkul* in religious coping by emphasizing reliance on Allah as a means of overcoming challenges and uncertainties in parenting SNC. It reinforces this trust, assuring believers that Allah will provide from unexpected sources. Same goes to this following *ḥadīth* which asserts that true reliance on Allah involves having faith that He will fulfill one’s needs and overcome challenges. This aligns with the concept of *tawakkul* in religious coping, which encourages believers to trust in Allah’s plan while making their best efforts, assured that Allah will manage the outcomes.

{ حَدَّثَنَا عُمَرُ بْنُ الْخَطَّابِ، قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ "لَوْ أَنَّكُمْ كُنْتُمْ تَوَكَّلُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ حَقَّ تَوَكُّلِهِ لَرَزَقْتُمْ كَمَا تُرْزَقُ الطَّيْرُ تَغْدُو خِمَاصًا وَتَرُوحُ بِطَانًا" }

« ‘Umar bin al-Khattāb narrated that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “If you were to rely upon Allah with the required reliance, then He would provide for you just as a bird is provided for, it goes out in the morning empty and returns full. » [Jāmī’ al-Tirmidhī, Book of Zuhd, Ḥadīth no. 2344]

In the commentary on this *ḥadīth*, al-Mubārakfūrī (1990) in his book *Tuḥfat al-Aḥwadhī* explains:

“The Prophet ﷺ likened the believer who truly relies on Allah to a bird that leaves its nest in the morning hungry (*khimāṣan*) and returns in the evening full (*biṭānan*). This indicates that *tawakkul* does not negate effort. The bird does not sit in its nest waiting for food; it flies out, searches, and strives. Yet, it does so with no anxiety, trusting that its provision is guaranteed.”

He explains that the bird’s daily search for sustenance illustrates that true reliance on Allah involves effort, not passivity, and that the believer must strive while trusting that provision ultimately comes from Allah. Al-Mubārakfūrī emphasizes that true *tawakkul* is not about abandoning action but about acting while the heart remains detached from the means, fully trusting in Allah’s decree. interpreted by classical scholars as a directive toward active *tawakkul*. Ibn al-‘Arabī (n.d.)

in *‘Āridhat al-Aḥwadhī* elaborates that *tawakkul* is a spiritual state combining physical action with inner surrender, where the believer works but entrusts the outcome entirely to Allah.

This *ḥadīth* and its commentaries offer deep relevance to parents of SNC. Their journey often involves immense effort, emotional resilience, and uncertainty. For them, this *ḥadīth* offers deep comfort: your daily efforts—appointments, therapies, advocacy, emotional labor—are like the bird’s flight. You strive, but your heart rests in the assurance that Allah sees, knows, and provides. *Tawakkul*, in this context, becomes a source of strength—encouraging them to do their best in caregiving, advocacy, and love, while trusting that Allah sees their struggle and will provide sustenance, ease, and reward in ways they may not foresee.

5.3 Seeking reward from Allah (*Ihtisāb*)

The concept of *ih̥tisāb*—seeking reward from Allah for enduring hardship—offers a powerful coping mechanism for parents of SNC. The daily routines of caregiving, often marked by exhaustion and emotional strain, can be transformed into acts of worship when parents consciously seek Allah’s reward (Madi et al., 2019). Social isolation is also another significant challenge. Most parents feel alienated from their communities due to the stigma surrounding disability (Rasool et al., 2024; Alqatarneh, 2020). Some even hide their children out of shame, influenced by cultural perceptions that associate disability with disgrace (Al-Dababneh et al., 2017). However, through *ih̥tisāb*, parents can reframe these experiences as opportunities for spiritual growth and divine reward.

Ihtisāb leads to positive coping, where parents show gratitude and believe that caring for SNC will lead their family to paradise and these children are their ‘ticket’. This perspective fosters optimism and gratitude, as parents begin to view their children not as burdens, but as blessings and potential means to attain Paradise (Singh et al., 2023). Alqatarneh et al. (2022) also highlights that parents find comfort meaning in their struggles by seeing their child’s presence as a divine blessing and a pathway to eternal reward. These parents believe with the reward guaranteed for them as mentioned in *Sūrah āl-Kahf*:

﴿ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ مَنْ أَحْسَنَ عَمَلًا ﴾

« Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds - indeed, We will not allow to be lost the reward of any who did well in deeds. » [Qur’ān, 18:30]

The implementation of *ih̥tisāb* among parents with SNC miraculously impacts their emotional coping. Optimism and gratitude, often developed through spiritual involvement, significantly contribute to the subjective well-being of these parents, promoting a positive outlook despite challenges faced. This positive outlook also mentioned in this *ḥadīth* narrated in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*:

{ يُحَدِّثُ أَنَّ سَمْعَ أُمِّ سَلَمَةَ، زَوْجَ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ تَقُولُ سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَقُولُ "مَا مِنْ عَبْدٍ تُصِيبُهُ مُصِيبَةٌ فَيَقُولُ إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ اللَّهُمَّ اجْزِنِي فِي مُصِيبَتِي وَأَخْلِفْ لِي خَيْرًا مِنْهَا إِلَّا أَجَرَهُ اللَّهُ فِي مُصِيبَتِهِ وَأَخْلَفَ لَهُ خَيْرًا مِنْهَا". }

« Umm Salama, the wife of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, reported Allah's Messenger ﷺ as saying: If any servant (of Allah) who suffers a calamity says: “We belong to Allah and to Him shall we return; O Allah, reward me for my affliction and give me something better than it in exchange for it”. Allah

will give him reward for affliction and would give him something better than it in exchange.” » [Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book of Prayer, Ḥadīth no. 918]

This ḥadīth narrated by Umm Salama, in which the Prophet ﷺ promises that anyone who responds to a calamity by saying, “*Innā lillāh wa innā ilayhi rāji‘ūn*—O Allah, reward me for my affliction and replace it with something better,” will be granted both reward and a better outcome, is a profound expression of *iḥtisāb*. Al-Nawawī, in *al-Minhāj Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, affirms that this supplication is unanimously recommended by scholars and highlights its spiritual merit in times of hardship (al-Nawawī, n.d.). Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, in *Ikmāl al-Mu‘lim*, explains that this promise is fulfilled for those who make the supplication sincerely, with hope in Allah’s reward—just as Umm Salama was granted the Prophet ﷺ as a husband after her loss (al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād, n.d.).

For parents with SNC, this ḥadīth offers deep spiritual reassurance: their trials, when met with sincere *iḥtisāb*, become a source of divine reward and a path to greater blessings. When they face emotional, physical, or social challenges and respond with *iḥtisāb*—acknowledging Allah’s decree and seeking reward through patience—they are promised divine compensation and spiritual elevation. Their trials, when met with sincere trust and supplication, become a means of nearness to Allah and a source of immense reward, just as Umm Salama’s loss became a gateway to a greater blessing.

6. CONCLUSION

The qualitative analysis conducted in this study validates that Islamic coping mechanisms, specifically *ṣabr* (patience), *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), and *iḥtisāb* (seeking reward), can play a crucial role in supporting parents with SNC in managing emotional and psychological challenges. The literature reviewed demonstrates that these Islamic principles offer approaches to coping by fostering resilience, reducing stress, and providing spiritual comfort. *Ṣabr* helps to endure difficulties positively, while *tawakkul* encourages to trust in a higher power, thus easing worries. *Iḥtisāb* provides way to understanding and being optimistic with life challenges. Although this study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and the lack of empirical data from parents with SNC, it provides a foundational understanding of how these Islamic concepts can be applied effectively in the context of parenting SNC.

Further research incorporating direct experiences of parents and comparisons with other religious frameworks could deepen the understanding and applicability of these findings. While this coping mechanism can enhance emotional well-being, it is essential to recognize that not all parents may find solace in this concept. Some may struggle with other issues, leading to increased stress and emotional challenges. Thus, a multifaceted approach that includes psychological support and community resources is vital for all parents. This study provides valuable insights for mental health practitioners, religious counsellors, and community leaders working with Muslim parents of SNC. By integrating Islamic coping strategies into counselling and support programs, these professionals can offer more culturally relevant and effective interventions.

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Zati Nazifah binti Abdul Rahim (Corresponding author)

Fakulti Pengajian Quran dan Sunnah
Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia
Bandar Baru Nilai
71800, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, MALAYSIA
Email: zatinazifah@raudah.usim.edu.my

Prof. Madya Dr. Noornajihan binti Ja’afar
Fakulti Pengajian Quran dan Sunnah
Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia
Bandar Baru Nilai
71800, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, MALAYSIA
Email: noornajihan@usim.edu.my