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**Vicarious Futurity: Parents' Perspectives on  
Locating Strength in Adolescents with Autism**

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## Abstract

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Research into Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has largely taken place within the biomedical model of illness and disease. It has focussed on young children, based on the understanding that early intervention provides the most positive outcomes for social, cognitive, and communication development. However, this has tended to overlook the need for research throughout the life span, including adolescence and adulthood, where very poor outcomes develop.

This study provides a space for parents to identify the strengths of adolescents with ASD and challenges the assumptions that the lived experience of ASD is associated mostly with dysfunctional family life. By identifying strengths in adolescents with ASD, parents engaged with conceptions of how these strengths might generate a positive perspective on the future for their adolescent child. Ten parents were asked to take or collect five photographs each of what they perceived as strengths that their adolescent displayed. A semi-structured interview was then carried out to explore the images. Analysis of the interviews was guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological epistemology where the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's experience. The data was analysed by latent thematic analysis that is theorised as an examination of the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations of the semantic content of the data.

The research found that the identified strengths of adolescents with ASD were those valued in functional and cultural terms by the family and supported daily family functioning in the home, at school, and other mainstream systems. Furthermore, parents identified it was ASD itself that constituted the inherent strength for the adolescent and promoting suitable attributes of the disorder was beneficial for family life. The strengths of adolescents with ASD reinforced the parent's belief in a more positive future as their adolescent grows into adulthood.

The principal implication of this research is that the professional systems supporting adolescents with ASD would benefit from shifting their conventional understanding of ASD and negative family experiences. By doing so, these systems could facilitate more positive attitudes towards ASD and harness these attitudes towards better support for parental well-being.

## Acknowledgments

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