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Talk Through Tales: Exploring Parent-Led Storytelling to Enhance Communication Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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ABSTRACT

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often experience challenges in communication, language development, and social interaction, which can affect their daily functioning and quality of life. Parent-led interventions have gained increasing attention because they enable families to provide consistent communication support within the child's natural environment. This study explored the effectiveness of parent-led storytelling as a home-based intervention for enhancing communication skills in children with ASD. A mixed-method research design was employed involving 10 children aged 4–10 years and their families over a six-week intervention period. At least one parent or primary caregiver participated in each family, while both parents actively engaged in the storytelling sessions in four families. Parents were guided to use picture books, story retelling, and scaffolded questioning to encourage expressive language, vocabulary development, and narrative skills. Quantitative data were collected through pre-and post-intervention communication assessments, and qualitative data were gathered from parental observation logs and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated improvements in expressive vocabulary, receptive understanding, turn-taking, joint attention, and spontaneous verbalization. Parents also reported increased confidence in supporting their children's communication, stronger parent-child interaction, and greater engagement during storytelling activities. The study suggests that parent-led storytelling is a practical, culturally adaptable, and cost-effective home-based intervention that can support communication development in children with ASD. The findings highlight the importance of empowering families as active partners in early communication intervention and offer practical implications for educators, clinicians, and researchers interested in family-centered approaches to autism support.

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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication and social interaction, together with restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). A systematic review of prevalence studies estimated a median global prevalence of approximately 1 in 100 children, although

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estimates vary substantially across regions and study methods (Zeidan et al., 2022). Communication differences can affect children's ability to express needs, interact with others, and participate in everyday social and educational activities.

Early communication intervention is important for supporting language development and social participation among children with ASD. A meta-analysis of language outcomes in young autistic children found a small but significant overall intervention effect, while also emphasizing variation across intervention characteristics and concerns about study quality (Sandbank et al., 2020). In many families, however, access to regular professional services may be constrained by cost, specialist availability, travel, and service infrastructure. Work in rural Bangladesh has similarly highlighted the need for culturally appropriate, feasible, and low-cost parent-mediated supports in resource-limited settings (Blake et al., 2017).

Parent-led or parent-mediated approaches are relevant because caregivers can embed communication opportunities within familiar routines. Evidence from a Cochrane review indicates that parent-mediated early interventions can produce benefits in aspects of parent-child interaction and child communication, although the size and certainty of effects vary across outcomes and studies (Oono et al., 2013). Such approaches therefore provide a rationale for equipping parents with structured strategies that can be used consistently at home.

Among home-based communication activities, storytelling and shared book reading offer a structured context for vocabulary use, turn-taking, responding to questions, and narrative participation. Studies with autistic preschoolers have reported increased verbal participation and book-specific vocabulary during dialogic reading, as well as encouraging outcomes when parents are trained to use shared-reading and naturalistic communication strategies (Akemoğlu & Tomeny, 2021; Fleury & Schwartz, 2017; Westerveld et al., 2021). More recent work also suggests that carefully designed prompts during parent-child shared reading can support language use and comprehension (Dong et al., 2026).

The evidence base is promising but still limited. A systematic review of dialogic reading interventions for children with autism found generally adequate-to-strong study quality but inconsistent effects on communicative initiations and responses, indicating a need for additional research across settings and intervention formats (Alharbi et al., 2025). Existing parent-implemented shared-reading studies have also typically involved relatively small samples (Akemoğlu & Tomeny, 2021; Westerveld et al., 2021). In Bangladesh, published parent-mediated research has demonstrated the feasibility of culturally adapted family intervention, but it has focused on behavioral strategies rather than structured storytelling (Blake et al., 2017).

Therefore, this study explores the potential of parent-led storytelling to enhance communication skills among children with ASD using a mixed-method research design. By examining both communication outcomes and parental experiences, the study aims to contribute context-specific evidence on a culturally adaptable, family-centered strategy that may assist educators, clinicians, researchers, and families in supporting communication development.

Literature Review

Parent-Led Interventions in Autism Spectrum Disorder

ASD involves persistent differences in social communication and interaction together with restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior or interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Because communication development occurs across everyday contexts, early interventions increasingly involve parents or caregivers as active intervention partners. A Cochrane review of parent-mediated early intervention found evidence of benefits for parent-child interaction and some child communication outcomes, while also noting heterogeneity and limitations in the evidence base (Oono et al., 2013).

Parent-mediated intervention is particularly relevant when families have limited access to specialist services. Language-focused intervention evidence suggests that caregiver involvement can contribute to gains, although intervention effects depend on participant, intervention, and measurement characteristics (Sandbank et al., 2020). In rural Bangladesh, Blake et al. (2017) showed that a culturally adapted parent-mediated behavioral program could be implemented with local families and emphasized the importance of accessible materials, cultural fit, and practical support. Together, these findings support family-centered approaches while cautioning against if all parent-mediated programs produce equivalent outcomes.

Storytelling as a Communication Intervention

Storytelling and shared book reading provide repeated opportunities for children to attend jointly to pictures and events, respond to questions, use vocabulary, and participate in reciprocal interaction. In a modified dialogic reading intervention, autistic preschoolers showed increased verbal participation and greater gains in book-specific vocabulary relative to baseline reading conditions (Fleury & Schwartz, 2017). These features make interactive story-based activities relevant to communication goals that involve both language and social participation.

Parent-implemented evidence is also emerging. Akemoğlu and Tomeny (2021) trained mothers to combine shared-reading techniques with naturalistic communication teaching strategies and reported increased child communicative acts in a small multiple-baseline study. Westerveld et al. (2021) found that an eight-week parent-implemented shared book reading program increased parents' use of book-related vocabulary and explicit teaching of story structure; children also showed increased verbal participation, although some child effects were attenuated after accounting for reading duration. Recent evidence further indicates that literal and inferential prompts during parent-child shared reading can facilitate language development in autistic children (Dong et al., 2026). A systematic review concludes that dialogic reading is promising for communication but that effects on initiation and response outcomes remain inconsistent across studies (Alharbi et al., 2025).

Storytelling Within Family-Centered Intervention

Family-centered intervention recognizes parents as active partners and seeks to integrate support into routines that are feasible outside clinical settings. Shared book

reading is well suited to this orientation because it can occur at home with familiar materials and can be adapted to a child's interests and communication level. Parent-implemented shared-reading studies demonstrate that caregivers can learn structured reading and communication strategies with coaching, although feasibility depends on family circumstances and sustained participation (Akemoğlu & Tomeny, 2021; Westerveld et al., 2021).

Cultural and contextual adaptation is especially important in lower-resource settings. In rural Bangladesh, parent-mediated intervention work found that materials needed to be culturally appropriate and matched to families' literacy and practical needs (Blake et al., 2017). Storytelling is already familiar within many families, but converting an everyday cultural practice into a structured communication intervention requires clear guidance, manageable routines, and attention to individual communication needs.

Research Gap

Although parent-mediated interventions and interactive shared reading can support communication in autistic children, important gaps remain. Evidence on dialogic reading is still inconsistent, particularly for communicative initiations and responses (Alharbi et al., 2025). Existing parent-implemented shared-reading studies have also involved small samples and limited research designs (Akemoğlu & Tomeny, 2021; Westerveld et al., 2021). In Bangladesh, parent-mediated interventions have been explored, but structured parent-led storytelling has received little empirical attention (Blake et al., 2017). To address these gaps, this study examines whether parent-led storytelling can improve expressive vocabulary, receptive understanding, joint attention, turn-taking, and spontaneous verbalization among children with ASD. It also explores parents' experiences and challenges in implementing storytelling at home and its role in strengthening parent-child interaction. Using pre- and post-intervention assessments alongside qualitative accounts from parents, the study evaluates parent-led storytelling as a practical, culturally adaptable, and cost-effective home-based communication intervention. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does parent-led storytelling influence the communication skills of children with ASD?
2. What impact does parent-led storytelling have on children's expressive vocabulary, receptive understanding, joint attention, turn-taking, and spontaneous verbalization?
3. What are the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of parents while implementing storytelling activities at home?
4. How does parent-led storytelling influence parent-child interaction during communication activities?
5. To what extent can parent-led storytelling serve as a practical, culturally adaptable, and cost-effective home-based communication intervention for children with ASD?

Method

Research Design

The study used a convergent parallel mixed-method design to examine the effectiveness of parent-led storytelling for children with ASD. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same six-week intervention and analyzed separately before being integrated during interpretation. Quantitative data came from pre- and post-intervention assessments of expressive vocabulary, receptive understanding, joint attention, turn-taking, and spontaneous verbalization. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, weekly parent reflections, and researcher observations to examine parents' experiences, challenges, and parent-child interaction during the intervention. The integration of both data types allowed the study to compare changes in children's communication with parents' experiences and observational evidence, providing a broader understanding of parent-led storytelling as a family-centered communication intervention.

Participants and Sampling

The study used purposive sampling to recruit 10 children with ASD, aged 4–10 years, and their families. All children had received a formal ASD diagnosis from a qualified healthcare professional and showed communication difficulties relevant to the study. Each child participated with at least one parent or primary caregiver who conducted the storytelling sessions at home. In most families, one caregiver led the intervention, while both parents participated in four families. Families were selected based on their willingness and ability to participate consistently throughout the six-week program. The small sample was appropriate for the exploratory mixed-method design, which focused on both communication outcomes and parents' experiences. The study aimed to provide context-specific evidence on parent-led storytelling rather than broad statistical generalization.

Data Collection

Data were collected over six weeks using quantitative and qualitative methods. Before the intervention, each child completed a baseline communication assessment covering expressive vocabulary, receptive understanding, joint attention, turn-taking, and spontaneous verbalization. Parents and primary caregivers then attended a brief orientation on the study procedures and received guidance on using picture books, story retelling, visual prompts, and scaffolded questions in a supportive, child-centered manner.

During the intervention, parents or primary caregivers conducted storytelling sessions at home for 15–20 minutes, four times per week. They used picture books, familiar stories, and self-created narratives suited to each child's interests and communication level. Children were encouraged to identify pictures, answer questions, retell parts of stories, describe characters, and express their own ideas. Parents also completed brief weekly reflection notes on their children's engagement, communication attempts, and difficulties, while the researcher conducted structured observations of eye contact, joint attention, vocabulary use, and participation.

At the end of the six-week intervention, parents or primary caregivers participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences, perceptions, challenges, and observed changes in their children's communication. The same communication assessment used at baseline was then administered again. Pre- and post-intervention scores were compared to identify changes in communication performance following the parent-led storytelling program.

Data Analysis

The study used a mixed-method approach to analyze quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data came from pre- and post-intervention communication assessments using a researcher-developed checklist that measured expressive vocabulary, receptive understanding, joint attention, turn-taking, and spontaneous verbalization. Each domain contained 10 items scored from 0 to 3, giving a maximum score of 30 per domain.

The same checklist was administered before and after the six-week intervention. Pre- and post-intervention scores were compared descriptively to identify changes in communication performance. Because the study was exploratory and involved a small sample, descriptive statistics were used instead of inferential tests.

Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews, weekly parent reflections, and researcher observations. The data were analyzed thematically by reading the materials repeatedly, coding meaningful statements, grouping related codes, and developing broader themes that represented parents' experiences, perceived benefits, and challenges during the intervention.

The quantitative and qualitative findings were then integrated during interpretation. Assessment results were compared with parents' accounts and researcher observations to determine whether changes in communication were supported across multiple data sources. This integration provided a more complete understanding of the role of parent-led storytelling in supporting communication development among children with ASD.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical principles for research involving human participants. Before data collection, parents or primary caregivers received information about the study purpose, procedures, duration, and voluntary participation, and all provided written informed consent. Families could withdraw at any time without consequences. Participant information was kept confidential and anonymized, with pseudonyms or codes used during analysis and reporting. Storytelling activities were designed to be safe, age-appropriate, and suitable for each child's needs and home routine. Parents conducted the sessions in supportive settings, and all research data were used only for academic purposes and stored securely.

Results

The findings are presented in two sections. The first section reports the quantitative results obtained from the pre-and post-intervention communication assessments, while the

second section presents the qualitative findings derived from parents' interviews, weekly reflection notes, and researcher observations. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the parent-led storytelling intervention.

Quantitative Findings

Children's communication skills were assessed before and after the six-week parent-led storytelling intervention using a researcher-developed communication checklist. Each communication domain consisted of ten items, with a maximum possible score of 30.

Table 1. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Intervention Communication Scores

Communication Domain	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	Improvement
Expressive Vocabulary	20	25	+5
Receptive Understanding	20	25	+5
Joint Attention	20	30	+10
Turn-Taking	20	30	+10
Spontaneous Verbalization	20	30	+10

The descriptive comparison of the assessment scores indicated improvement across all five communication domains following the intervention. Expressive vocabulary and receptive understanding increased from 20 to 25, while joint attention, turn-taking, and spontaneous verbalization reached the maximum score of 30. These findings suggest that regular parent-led storytelling was associated with positive changes in children's communication performance during the six-week intervention period.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings were derived from semi-structured interviews with parents, weekly reflection notes, and researcher observations. Thematic analysis identified three major themes.

Theme 1: Improvement in Children's Communication Skills

Most parents reported noticeable improvements in their children's communication abilities. They observed that their children became more willing to answer questions, identify pictures, use new vocabulary, retell familiar stories, and initiate simple conversations during storytelling sessions. Researcher observations supported these reports, indicating increased participation, improved attention, and greater confidence in verbal communication.

Theme 2: Strengthened Parent–Child Interaction

Parents described storytelling as an enjoyable family activity that promoted regular communication and strengthened emotional connections. The storytelling sessions encouraged meaningful conversations, shared attention, and collaborative learning experiences. Several parents noted that their children became more responsive and engaged during daily interactions beyond the scheduled storytelling sessions.

Theme 3: Challenges Encountered During the Intervention

Although the overall experience was positive, parents reported several challenges during the intervention. Some children initially experienced difficulty maintaining attention throughout the storytelling sessions and required repeated prompts, visual support, or encouragement. In addition, some caregivers found it challenging to maintain a consistent schedule because of work and household responsibilities. However, most parents reported that these challenges gradually decreased as storytelling became a familiar part of the family's routine.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated consistent evidence supporting the effectiveness of parent-led storytelling. Improvements observed in the communication assessment scores were reinforced by parents' experiences and researcher observations. Together, these findings indicate that structured storytelling conducted by parents can enhance children's communication skills while also strengthening parent–child interaction within the home environment. The results support the potential of parent-led storytelling as a practical, family-centered communication intervention for children with ASD.

Discussion

This study investigated the effectiveness of parent-led storytelling in enhancing the communication skills of children with ASD. The findings indicate that the six-week storytelling intervention was associated with positive improvements in expressive vocabulary, receptive understanding, joint attention, turn-taking, and spontaneous verbalization. In addition to these communication outcomes, parents reported stronger parent-child interaction and increased confidence in supporting their children's communication development.

The quantitative findings demonstrated improvement across all five communication domains following the intervention. Because the study used descriptive rather than inferential analysis, the changes should be interpreted as within-sample patterns rather than evidence of a causal treatment effect. Even so, the direction of change is compatible with broader intervention evidence showing that language outcomes in young autistic children can improve through structured intervention, including approaches involving caregivers (Oono et al., 2013; Sandbank et al., 2020).

The qualitative findings provide further insight into the observed changes. Parents described storytelling as an enjoyable and interactive activity that encouraged children to respond to questions, use new words, and participate more actively. This pattern is consistent with dialogic and shared-reading studies in which interactive prompting and adult responsiveness increased verbal participation and vocabulary-related outcomes among autistic children (Dong et al., 2026; Fleury & Schwartz, 2017; Westerveld et al., 2021). The present findings therefore suggest that storytelling may provide a natural context in which communication practice can be embedded within parent-child interaction.

The results are also consistent with more directly parent-implemented shared-reading research. Akemoğlu and Tomeny (2021) showed that parents could be trained to use shared-reading and naturalistic communication strategies and that child communicative acts increased in their small multiple-baseline study. Westerveld et al.

(2021) likewise demonstrated the feasibility of parent-implemented shared book reading and reported changes in parent strategy use and child verbal participation. At the same time, the systematic review by Alharbi et al. (2025) found that effects on communicative initiations and responses were not uniform across dialogic-reading studies. The current study should therefore be viewed as additional exploratory evidence rather than confirmation of a universally effective intervention.

Several implementation challenges identified in the present study also have parallels in previous research. Parents reported difficulty maintaining schedules, and some children needed repeated prompts or visual support to remain engaged. Westerveld et al. (2021) reported participant withdrawal related to timing and parental workload, illustrating how family routines can influence intervention feasibility. In Bangladesh, Blake et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of culturally appropriate materials, accessible language, and practical support when adapting parent-mediated intervention. These observations suggest that parent-led storytelling programs should be flexible, responsive to family capacity, and supported by clear coaching or guidance.

The findings should be interpreted considering the study's limitations. The relatively small sample size and the six-week intervention period limit the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the use of descriptive analysis means that the findings should be interpreted as evidence from an exploratory mixed-method study rather than as proof of causal effectiveness. Future research involving larger samples, longer intervention periods, and additional communication measures would provide further evidence regarding the effectiveness of parent-led storytelling for children with ASD.

Overall, the findings suggest that parent-led storytelling is a potentially useful, family-centered, and culturally adaptable approach for supporting communication practice among children with ASD. This interpretation is consistent with the broader literature on parent-mediated intervention and the emerging evidence base for dialogic and shared book reading (Alharbi et al., 2025; Oono et al., 2013). However, the present results are exploratory and should be tested in larger, controlled studies using validated communication measures and longer follow-up periods.

Conclusion

This study examined parent-led storytelling as a home-based intervention for improving communication among children with ASD. Over the six-week intervention, children showed gains in expressive vocabulary, receptive understanding, joint attention, turn-taking, and spontaneous verbalization. Parents' interviews, weekly reflections, and researcher observations also indicated greater child engagement, stronger parent-child interaction, and increased parental confidence in supporting communication development. These findings suggest that structured storytelling can be integrated into everyday family routines as a practical, culturally adaptable, and family-centered strategy. For families, educators, and clinicians, parent-led storytelling may complement existing communication support by providing regular opportunities for language practice at home. Schools and intervention programs may also strengthen home-school collaboration by providing parents with appropriate storytelling materials and guidance.

The findings should be interpreted cautiously because the study involved only 10 children, lasted six weeks, used a researcher-developed communication checklist, and relied on descriptive rather than inferential analysis. These limitations restrict generalizability and do not establish a causal effect of the intervention. Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples, longer intervention periods, standardized communication measures, and stronger statistical designs to examine both short- and long-term outcomes. Further research should also compare parent-led storytelling with other parent-mediated interventions and explore its effectiveness across different cultural and educational settings. Policymakers and service providers may consider supporting family-centered programs that equip parents with practical storytelling strategies, particularly in communities where access to specialized services is limited.

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