

Sustainable Health for Parents of Children with Special Needs

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Introduction

The concept of sustainable health encompasses the long-term enhancement and maintenance of individuals' physical, mental, and social well-being. Sustainable health includes not only improving existing health problems but also focuses on the resources and support systems needed to maintain health.

The issue of sustainable health for caregivers, particularly parents of children with special needs, has often been overlooked. It is crucial to prioritize the physical and psychological well-being of caregivers, as this directly affects their quality of life and the care they provide to those they look after. In this regard, Occupational Therapy is a critical health discipline that supports caregivers' well-being sustainably, enhances their quality of life, and improves care processes.

The sustainability of improvement is as crucial as enhancing the psychological, physical, and social well-being of parents. Therefore, this section will explore the role of occupational therapy science in promoting sustainable health for parents of individuals with special needs. It will also cover evidence-based occupational therapy interventions and discuss future trends.

Definition and Importance of Sustainable Health

Health is commonly defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, rather than merely the absence of disease or disability. It is regarded as a fundamental human right that should be accessible to every individual, regardless of race, religion, political beliefs, or economic or social conditions (WHO, 2025). The achievement of optimal health for all people is essential for the attainment of peace and security, and it depends on the fullest cooperation among individuals, communities, and states. Furthermore, the health advancements made by any state contribute to global well-being, highlighting the collective value of promoting and protecting health. Unequal progress

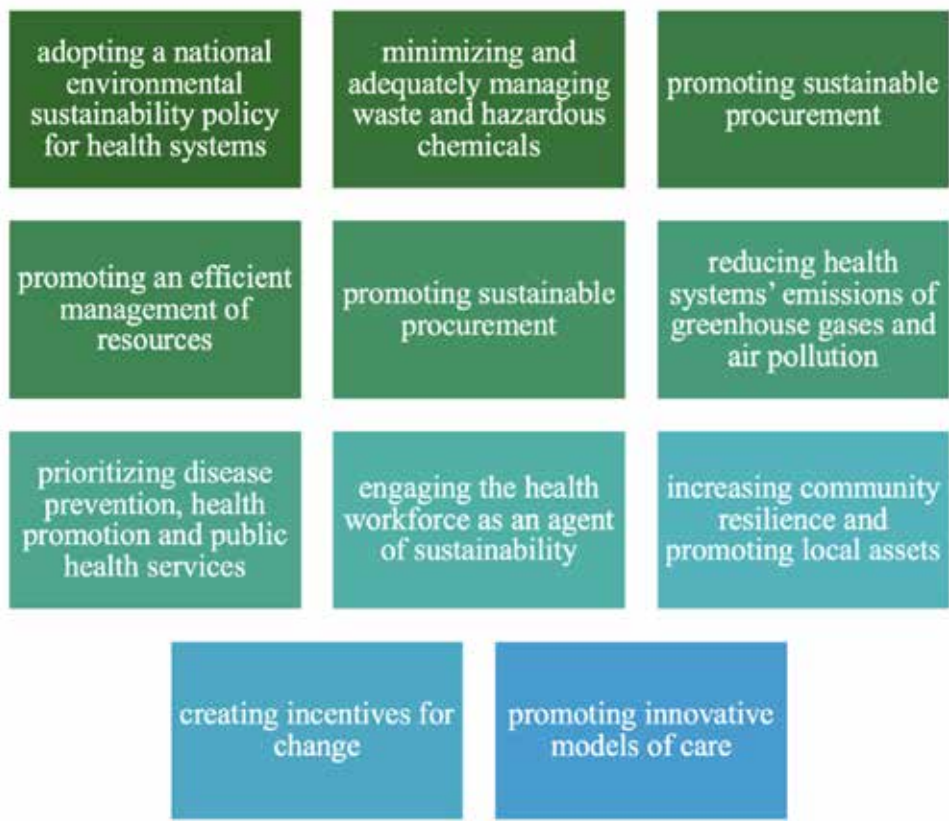
in health promotion and disease control, particularly in communicable diseases, poses a global risk.

The healthy development of children is vital because it lays the foundation for their ability to live harmoniously in a changing environment. Access to medical, psychological, and related services is essential for achieving optimal health standards for all populations. Public involvement, informed opinions, and active cooperation are crucial for improving health outcomes. Ultimately, governments have the responsibility to ensure the health of their populations by implementing adequate health and social measures.

Figure 1
WHO logo and plan



Table 1
Ten avenues for the core of a strategy



The Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All (SDG3 GAP), established in 2019, brings together 13 multilateral health, development, and humanitarian agencies.

Its goal is to accelerate progress on health-related SDG targets by strengthening collaboration among agencies, enabling joint action, and supporting country-led national plans (WHO, 2019). An environmentally sustainable health system is defined as one that promotes health while minimizing environmental harm and leveraging opportunities to improve it for current and future generations (WHO, 2017). Ten avenues for action are proposed that can form the core of a strategy for fostering environmental sustainability in health systems, namely (Table 1).

Special Children and Their Caregivers

Unlike individuals who develop normally, some individuals develop differently and benefit only partially or not at all from general education services. In the past, referred to as a disability, this condition is now termed special needs because it is less stigmatizing. It is defined as the inability to fulfill, or only limited ability to fulfill, the roles expected based on age, gender, and social and cultural factors due to the individual's specific condition (Metin, 2018).

Having a child with special needs requires more responsibility than having a child with typical development. These responsibilities include caring for the child with special needs, taking the child to the doctor more frequently due to their special condition, providing financial support for their nutrition and education expenses, overcoming their behavioral, learning, and psychological problems and receiving support in this regard, caring for other children who are developing normally, coping with problems experienced with one's spouse, and informing the people around them about their child's special condition (Toy & Kesici, 2020).

Care is defined as the effort expended to ensure that something develops well and remains in good condition; it is defined as the work done to take on and meet a person's needs, such as feeding, clothing, etc. (TDK, 2023). Care can be analyzed under two headings. These headings are formal care and informal care. Formal caregiving refers to care provided by professional healthcare workers or institutions, usually in the form of paid and organized services. Informal caregiving refers to care provided by family members, friends, or volunteers, mostly in an unpaid and informal manner (Sarisahin, 2023).

Caring for a special child exposes parents to high levels of stress, increasing their risk of mental health disorders. Psychological resilience factors can serve as resources to reduce the harmful effects of stress, benefiting both parents and their children, and fostering positive, resilient outcomes (Broll et al., 2025).

In a study conducted to determine the difficulties experienced by home caregivers, it was found that the burden of care was mostly (83.7%) on women (Alpteker, 2008). In another study conducted to determine the care stress of informal caregivers, it was found that

caregivers had hypertension, weakening of the immune system, as well as depression or anxiety, and care-related stress (Gopalan & Brannon, 2006).

Among mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, the motivation for caregiving has a multifaceted nature. External motivations include support received from family, social networks, and formal sources. Internal motivations include factors such as mothers' unconditional love for their children, the spiritual satisfaction they derive from their role as mothers, their sense of responsibility, faith-based interpretations, and the inner happiness they feel from their children's small developmental steps (Hosseini et al., 2024). Understanding these motivations can facilitate the development of targeted support programs and interventions that address the unique needs and challenges faced by these caregivers. Health service providers and policymakers, by recognizing and enhancing various sources of motivation, can better support mothers in their caregiving roles, ultimately contributing to better outcomes for both mothers and their children.

Social Support and Family Dynamics

Family dynamics experienced by parents of children with special needs play a major role in shaping both the roles within the family and the psychological, physical, and social needs of family members.

Open communication and cooperation between parents ensures that the burden of care is evenly distributed. However, the stress of caregiving can damage relationships between spouses. Parents supporting each other and seeking solutions together provide balance within the family.

Parents of children with disabilities may sometimes experience fears of being left alone in their caregiving role. The disclosure of a child's diagnosis can place significant strain on a marriage, occasionally resulting in separation or abandonment. In some cases, one partner struggles to come to terms with the child's condition (Duma et al., 2021; Matambanadzo & Rhoda, 2024). Raising awareness among fathers of children with disabilities is particularly important, as their active involvement in caregiving can ease the mother's burden and promote shared responsibility (Cramm & Nieboer, 2011). Gender differences in care roles are questionable, as mothers are expected to be the caregivers of children to a degree that can affect their economic activities. While mothers and fathers have different roles, this does not mean that the woman alone should assume responsibility for meeting the child's daily needs (Ndadzungira, 2016).

Families with children with disabilities often develop a strong emotional attachment to their children. While this attachment can lead family members to put more effort into their children, it can also lead parents to ignore their individual needs. Caring for children with disabilities requires additional expenses and large investments in health care. This

financial burden can affect the economic situation of family members and cause tensions within the family. For some families, the inability of parents to participate in the labor market due to the care of a child with a disability can also be a major problem.

Families with children with disabilities can often experience social isolation. Society's lack of awareness about children with disabilities and their families can lead to feelings of isolation. Families' social support networks and social ties play an important role in the care of their children (Manteau-Rao, 2016).

Support groups created to alleviate the emotional burdens experienced by parents of children with disabilities help parents feel that they are not alone, share their experiences, and increase their psychological resilience (Shilling et al., 2013; Kidfirst, 2025).

Community-Based Approaches for Sustainable Health

In Türkiye, various services sponsored by the government are provided by non-governmental organizations and local authorities to ensure the sustainable health of children with special needs and their parents. These services are continuously improved to make caregiving processes more sustainable, protect the psychological and physical health of families, and strengthen their social support networks. Education, psychological support, social services, and technology-based solutions that increase accessibility play a major role in this process.

In the “2030 Barrier-Free Vision Document” of the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MFSS), the goal is stated as “building an inclusive society where persons with disabilities can realize their potential as equal citizens.” This Vision Document includes individuals and their families who are affected by environmental and attitudinal barriers that restrict full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others due to various levels of impairment in physical, mental, psychological, and sensory abilities. It emphasizes that the concept of disability is evolving and transforming over time, and therefore, the scope should be considered open to change.

The vision in the field of disability is based on the following fundamental principles (MFSS,2021,p:10-13):

Table 2

The visions in the field of disability

- | |
|--|
| » Respect for human dignity and individual autonomy, including the freedom to make one's own choices and independence of persons |
| » Non-discrimination |
| » Full and effective participation and inclusion in society of persons with disabilities |

- | |
|--|
| » Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity |
| » Equal opportunities |
| » Accessibility |
| » Gender equality |
| » Respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and their right to preserve their identities |

An inclusive society acknowledges that every individual has unique characteristics and different needs, and ensures that each person — including persons with disabilities — can benefit from general policies, programs, and services by addressing these diverse needs. Relying solely on mainstreaming disability as a method to achieve social inclusion may risk overlooking the diversity of disabilities and the specific measures required to address them.

A dual-track approach aims to eliminate this risk by ensuring that, within the process of mainstreaming disability, appropriate measures and adjustments are made to address the differing needs that arise depending on the type and degree of disability. A key element of this process is that these measures and adjustments must be decided together with persons with disabilities. In order to realize the vision of building an inclusive society where persons with disabilities can realize their potential as equal citizens, 8 policy goals (Figure 3) have been defined across various policy areas. These are accompanied by 31 objectives and 107 action items, which will serve as a basis for the activities aimed at achieving these objectives (MFSS,2021,p:15).

Figure 3

Policy Areas



Under the goal of independent living, *Objective 1* is:

“The development and expansion of diversified and next-generation care services that support independent living for persons with disabilities and their families.” This scope also includes caregivers (MFSS,2021,p:71-77).

The Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, in its Disabled Health Committee Report Circular (2018/4), states the following:

“Based on the foundations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and developed by the World Health Organization to create a common standard language and framework, the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health, Children and Youth Version (ICF-CY) is a comprehensive international classification system that enables the definition of individuals’ functionality, activities, participation in life, and limitations in these areas. Based on this system, classification studies regarding disability and special needs have been prepared.”

“The newly registered regulation in interest is not based on ‘disability rate’, but on ‘needs’. The Special Needs Report for Children specifies which services children require, facilitating the access of children and their families to rights and services, without leading to any loss of rights.” (RTMH,2024).

In this context, strengthening community-based services is emphasized as a means to facilitate easier access for children and families to the support they need. Additionally, the goal is to enhance social participation and provide a more sustainable quality of life.

1. Tohum Autism Foundation

Services: Provides education, rehabilitation, and family support programs for children with autism spectrum disorder. Additionally, it offers psychological support and informational services to families (TOV, 2025).

2. Türkiye Down Syndrome Association

Services: Works on the education, integration, and rights of individuals with Down syndrome. It provides counseling and psychological support services to families (TDSD, 2025).

3. Cerebral Palsy Children’s Association

Services: Works on the education and rehabilitation of children with cerebral palsy. It organizes support services and informational meetings for parents (Serçev, 2025).

4. Rare Diseases Research Association

Services: Works to raise awareness about rare diseases, provide early diagnosis and treatment opportunities, and offer psychological support to individuals and families fighting these diseases (NHAD, 2025).

5. Leukemia Children Foundation

Services: Provides psychological, social, educational, and financial support to children and families fighting leukemia and other cancer types. It also offers various rehabilitation programs and social services to individuals undergoing cancer treatment (Lösev, 2025).

These NGOs provide essential services to meet the social, psychological, and educational needs of children with special needs and their families. While parents of children with special needs bear a considerable responsibility at every stage of the care process, they also face significant emotional, psychological, and physical challenges. In this context, the enhancement of community-based sustainable health approaches will empower parents to manage their care processes more healthily. With the provision of suitable guidance and resources from the community, as well as professional support, it is possible for families to enhance the well-being of both themselves and their children.

Community-based health services have been found to support individuals with disabilities and their families to achieve a more sustainable quality of life by increasing their social inclusion. In this framework, the state, non-governmental organizations, and relevant stakeholders can work together to take an important step towards building a more inclusive and just society by improving opportunities such as education, psychological support, and social services for families. Such practices will improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities and their families, while reinforcing social solidarity and equality.

The Role of Occupational Therapy in the Context of Sustainable Health

Occupational therapy focuses on the health and development of the baby while supporting the psychological and emotional health of the parent. It provides education and guidance for parents, helping them cope with stress. Therapists apply ergonomic approaches and family-centered care principles to improve parents' physical and psychological health (Antinora et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2020). This can reduce parents' stress levels and lead them to caregiving more effectively. Therapists take a holistic approach, taking into account the mental health of the parents. This helps parents to be psychologically empowered during caregiving (Stovall et al., 2025).

Identifying which factors cause stress during care, realistically assessing one's capacity for action, and effective problem-solving ability can be explained as a mechanism by which resilience facilitates adaptation. There are very few studies with adults on

resilience, which alleviates the negative effects of stress and supports adaptation. Childhood research suggests that resilience develops in trusting relationships with role models who advocate self-esteem and through effective family functioning. These findings suggest that a similar process will be followed in adulthood (Broll et. al, 2025). Resilience also refers to emotional resilience and has been used to describe people who exhibit courage and adaptability following life's misfortunes. Activities that create “me time” for caregivers can provide them with emotional relief (Figure 1). A variety of strategies can be used to guide the caregiver in discovering meaningful and purposeful recreations for themselves and to support their participation in existing recreations. Occupational therapists can make this process more effective by raising awareness of people's “me time” in line with their professional knowledge and skills.

Figure 2

Me time



Effects of Occupational Therapy Interventions on Caregivers

Occupational therapists provide assessment, strengthening, education, and skill training for caregivers. Occupational therapists offer alternative ideas and solutions for a new therapeutic partnership that strengthens the patient-therapist dyad in order to create a new caregiver-patient-therapist triad (Moghimi, 2007). In non-individual-centered programs, the needs of individuals may be overlooked, and intervention programs may be inadequate. In addition, a homogeneous group is required for the implementation of package programs, which is not very realistic in practice (Köse & Akı, 2019).

Supporting parent-child bonding encourages parents to interact with their children and supports the role of the parent in this context through co-occupation. This enables parents to participate more actively in caregiving processes. For caregivers, care recipient-centered interventions help to achieve rehabilitation goals, with many of the interventions improving and facilitating the care provided. For example, training caregivers on how to perform care tasks provides opportunities to practice new care-related skills and is accompanied by feedback/coaching (Moghimi, 2007).

Occupational therapists apply ergonomic approaches and family-centered care principles to improve the physical and psychological health of parents. Occupational therapists adopt a holistic approach, taking into account the mental health of parents. This process enables parents to experience psychological empowerment within their caregiving role (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). It emphasizes the importance of identifying personal strengths, exploring new sources of fulfillment, fostering growth, and discovering or redefining life purpose and spirituality. Such empowerment may involve character building, acquiring new skills and knowledge, enhancing confidence and competence, adapting to a “new normal,” and cultivating or deepening spiritual connections (Demers, 2022).

Occupational therapists strengthen the parents’ role in the care process by collaborating with other health professionals. This allows the whole health team to be an active participant in the parents’ caregiving process. Caregivers need to be supported in developing new or deeper relationships with other people. Two types of relationships prevail: family and friends; other care-related relationships (health professionals, caregivers) (Demers, 2022).

Occupational therapy is an important help for the parent to adapt to their new role. For example, therapy sessions that allow the parent to participate in the care of the baby can also increase the parent’s self-confidence. Occupational therapists can develop strategies to create “me time” for parents, enabling caregivers to care for themselves and improving their overall quality of life.

Table 3

Steps to Caregiver-Specific Approach to Occupational Participation (Demers, 2022).

Steps to Caregiver-Specific Approach to Occupational Participation.

Steps	Description
Step 1	Identify challenging caregiving tasks • to make them easier • to make them safer
Step 2	Delve deeper into caregivers’ experiences • motivations for caregiving • what sustains and makes caregiving enjoyable
Step 3	Explore the caregivers’ needs, goals, and desires beyond caregiving

By taking into account both the challenges and rewards of caregiving, together with caregivers’ personal needs, goals, and aspirations across different aspects of life, it becomes possible to develop a holistic understanding of their situation. This perspective allows practitioners to collaborate with caregivers as clients, supporting them in strengthening autonomy and fostering social participation as their life conditions evolve.

Based on this view, a new three-stage approach is proposed as outlined below. Step 1: Identify the physically and emotionally demanding caregiving tasks, and work to make these tasks more accessible and safer for both the caregiver and the care recipient. Step 2: Understand why caregivers provide care, what motivates them throughout the process, and what aspects make caregiving meaningful or fulfilling. Step 3: Explore not only the caregiver's role in caregiving, but also their personal goals, desires, and needs beyond caregiving. These three steps aim to enhance both the caregiver's quality of life and their overall caregiving experience. (Table 3) (Demers, 2022).

Future Directions for Sustainable Health

A multifaceted approach is needed to support the sustainable health of parents with children with special needs. Sustainable health for parents of children with special needs must be approached holistically, both at the individual level and at the societal level. Future directions should target the implementation of various strategies to improve the quality of life of these parents, to help them cope with the challenges in the care process, and to ensure that they can lead a healthy life. This process includes not only the accessibility of health services, but also the strengthening of the social support systems needed by families and caregivers.

Social support systems for caregivers of children with special needs to be strengthened. Community-based health services play a critical role in maintaining the sustainable health of parents. Systematic policies for the physical and psychological health of caregivers need to be developed. Increasing the level of education of caregivers enables them to be more effective in the care process and, at the same time, maintain their own health. Providing regular psychological support and rehabilitation services for caregivers will sustain their health (WHO, 2021).

Digital health apps can make parents' care processes more efficient and improve time management. Such digital tools offer practical solutions that reduce the burden of caregiving for parents. The goal should be to change societal perceptions of parents of children with special needs. These campaigns lead to greater understanding, empathy, and support in society. Expanding programs for parents of children with special needs to more regions and making them accessible through digital platforms will help reach a wider audience.

Different interventions such as education, complementary and supportive therapies, psychotherapy, inclusion in social groups, and family education programs are used to improve the quality of life of caregivers and to cope with the difficulties experienced. Existing programs should be revised in accordance with the age. Table 4 shows sample family education programs for parents of children with special needs.

Table 4

Programs Implemented for Family Education of Children with Special Needs (Metin, 2012)

Group-Based Family Education Program	These programs involve bringing together families of children with similar characteristics.
Home-Based Family Education Program	This program provides benefits in terms of involving all family members in the process. Because family education will be conducted in the home environment, there are potential risks that could disrupt education.
Home and Institution-Based Family Education Program	This program ensures that the skills learned at the institution are continued at home.

Family education programs have a serious importance in the education of children with special needs. The needs of the family should be assessed by the educator. In order for these families to be able to manage their time, the training program should be as short as possible and realistic and limited goals should be set in line with the needs of the family. During the training process, a therapeutic relationship should be established with the family, appropriate communication techniques should be used, and feedback about the process should be obtained by establishing a trusting relationship (Sh et al., 2015).

Future directions should concentrate on the effective management of the challenges and stressors faced by families, whilst developing systems that support caregivers to provide healthy long-term care. In this context, holistic approaches such as education, social support, and psychological recovery programmes are critical to maintain the sustainable health of caregivers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, meeting the sustainable health needs of caregivers with children with special needs should not only include their physical health but also their psychological and social well-being. The supportive interventions offered by occupational therapists to caregivers are of great importance to improve their quality of life and prevent negative effects such as burnout. In this context, it is necessary to increase educational programs for caregivers, strengthen social support networks, and implement strategies to protect

the physical health of caregivers. In addition, the development of health policies to take more into account the social, psychological, and economic needs of caregivers will be a critical step towards sustainable health.

Occupational therapists should continue to support the health of caregivers in a sustainable manner with community-based approaches and multidisciplinary collaboration, which will contribute to the creation of healthier and more resilient societies in the future. By providing comprehensive interventions for parents in this process, occupational therapy can improve their quality of life and ensure the sustainability of the care process. Strategies such as continuing education, social support networks, and professional guidance are crucial for parents to provide healthy care. Strengthening intra-family support, reducing social isolation, and easing the care burden of parents through ergonomic strategies are key factors for sustainable caregiving.

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