



# Promoting the Educational Success of Students with Autism: The Role of the Parent-Staff Relationship

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Despite research which highlights practical recommendations for involving students with autism in general education settings and documented examples of success, there continues to be tremendous variability in the type and quality of programming delivered to students across the autism spectrum including autism, Asperger's syndrome, and other pervasive developmental disorders. It appears that decisions and practices for students are often influenced by the philosophical beliefs of a specific school district, the geographical location of the student, administrative issues, and the skills of those involved rather than on the educational needs of students. This variability in services highlights the need to not only identify those factors which are critical for student success, but to prepare those involved in implementing these procedures.

In 1997, family members and professionals of middle school-aged students were surveyed to examine the various educational services, instructional strategies, and administrative supports which were in place to assist teachers in educating students with autism. For example, educators were asked to rank their access to collaboration, paraprofessional support, planning time, external professional consultants, training, and administrative support for inclusion. Parents were questioned about their satisfaction concerning their son/daughter's educational program, and to determine those factors which promoted their satisfaction. The study took place in two parts, with the administration of parent surveys preceding those of the teacher surveys.

The following article is the first of a two-part feature summarizing the results of the study conducted at the Indiana Resource Center for Autism (IRCA) at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community. The article below focuses on the section of the parent questionnaire which examined how the relationship and communication process between parents and school staff influenced students' educational progress. The roles and views of parents have been an under represented aspect of the literature on educational programming for students with autism and therefore, was a major focus of the study. The second article will examine responses from the educator survey.

Teamwork and collaborative planning are considered essential for successful inclusion (Simpson, 1995). The student's team, consisting of special and general

education teachers, administrators, family members, and the student should have the opportunity to meet regularly to plan appropriate services and to determine realistic outcomes for the student. These team meetings allow each member to share their expertise and to voice any concerns. Simpson (1995) believes that including parents in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process has a great influence on the quality of the IEP. A feature which can either greatly hinder or promote successful teamwork is the quality of the relationship between parents and school staff. A positive relationship and ongoing communication between staff and family members plays a central role in the educational success of all students. For students with autism, it takes on an even greater importance.

## Participants

Twenty-one parents of middle school-aged children with autism participated in the study. Students ranged in age from 12-14 and all resided in the state of Indiana. A majority of the students in the sample were placed in a

combination of general and special education classrooms during the school day. Only three students were placed in full-time self-contained classes, three participated in general education classes on a full-time (100%) basis, and 15 received combined services. Therefore, for purposes of this study, students with autism were placed into one of two groups: integrated or segregated based on whether the students were included in structured or non-structured academic classes. Those in the integrated group were included in structured academic classes (e.g., math, English, reading, social studies). Those in the segregated group were either not included at all in general education settings, or only participated in non-structured activities (e.g., music, PE, lunch). Final group distribution broke down to 10 in the integrated group and 11 in the segregated group.

## Summary of Results

The first step in analyzing the data was to examine differences between the responses of parents with children in the integrated setting and the responses of parents with children in the segregated setting. The results show that parents of children in integrated settings were:

- More satisfied with the staff's commitment to the education of their son/daughter;
- More satisfied with their child's academic progress; and
- Slightly more satisfied with their child's behavioral progress.

The next step in analyzing parent responses was to examine factors which influenced parent satisfaction with the academic progress of their child. To do this, we compared the responses of parents who were satisfied with their child's academic progress with the responses of parents who were not satisfied. The results show that parents who were satisfied with their child's educational progress also tended to be:

- More satisfied with the staff's commitment to the education of their child;
- More satisfied with the staff's knowledge of autism;
- More satisfied with the staff's ability to communicate with parents; and
- More satisfied with the dedication of the staff to teamwork involving parents.

The results of this study suggest that parents who have children in integrated placements tended to be more satisfied with their child's academic progress and with the staff's commitment to the education of their child. Only slight differences in parent satisfaction with behavioral progress were observed. In addition, parents who were satisfied with their child's academic progress tended to view the relationship between themselves and school staff as more positive and collaborative. These parents also rated the school staff as more committed to the education of their child and better able to communicate with parents.

In summary, the results support the importance of a positive parent-professional relationship, and highlight the role of collaboration and teamwork in the educational programming of students with autism. School systems that exclude parents from key decision-making, and fail to promote a sense of teamwork between themselves and parents are significantly limiting their chances for successfully delivering services to students with autism. Parents have proven to be vital resources for professionals working with children. Nobody knows the child better than the parent. School staff should capitalize on the parent's personal expertise. The results of this study suggest that parents and professionals who work collaboratively as a team increase their chances of delivering effective services to students with autism, and promote educational success.

## References:

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