

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER SERIES

Increasing Parental Involvement for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Disabilities

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Abstract

This literature review focused on the probable causes for a lack of parental involvement for students with ASD and other learning disabilities within the special education system, and how to address the issue. Research shows parents are typically poorly informed on the services their child may be eligible to receive, feel confronted by technical jargon and unfamiliar terms, and face numerous unfair procedural safeguards. These factors plus overall dissatisfaction with the schools and educational system have contributed to the low numbers of parental involvement for students with ASD and other learning disabilities. Schools must make efforts to address these issues by encouraging parents to share concerns and respond proactively, share outside resources and information, and clearly explain processes such as the IEP, and available services.

How Can We Increase Parental Involvement for Children with ASD and/or disabilities?

Although today we provide many services for our Special Education students, this was not the cases prior to the signing of P.L94-142, today known as The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act- IDEIA. (Valle, 2011). Credit is due to the many parents who challenged the system, bringing lawsuits to the forefront of the United States education system, on behalf of their child with disabilities. Although it is these parents we have to thank for bringing about change that provides education to all students, the frustrations and issues that arise today are similar to the experiences of the past. These parents who face difficulties within the special education system are likely to be less involved in their child's academic life. Whether this is due to resistance they encounter from the child's school or a lack of understanding of the system, parents who are less involved are risking their child not being given the proper accommodations and modifications they need in order to reach their academic goals. On a larger picture, as more parents decided to opt out of being involved, the programs receive less feedback on needs it should be targeting, and as a result are less effective in helping students. (Burke, 2013).

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It is of the up most importance that schools, administrators, and educators, make every effort to inform parents on the services and placements that are provided to special education students and increase parental involvement for children with disabilities. Therefore the topic I have chosen to investigate is: How can we increase parental involvement for children with ASD and/or disabilities?

In researching how to increase parental involvement, it is important first to identify the reasons for low parental involvement. In Valles (2011) interviews of fifteen mothers of children with learning disabilities, she identifies common themes in many of their experiences. These common threads range from intuition of something “being off”, to the fear of their child being isolated, and finally resistance from the school systems in accommodating to the child. It is this resistance from schools that drives parents away, and pushes them into a passive role, instead of an active advocate for their child. The resistance from schools to explain the services, and supports that should be provided as well as explanations of the legalities that contributes to the lack of parental participation. (Burke, 2013). Often times the terminology and jargon used by schools and educators is confusing for parents, especially parents who do not speak English as a first language. It is important to note that involving parents is mandatory due to IDEA; this was done with the intention that schools do not attempt to make major decisions on the child without parents’ approval, or that schools do not attempt to bar parents from being involved. However, if parents are unable to understand the language, or explanations given they are once again forced into a passive role.

Also, it has been noted that schools have neglected to inform parents of the complete process of their child’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (Valle, 2011) and will hold meetings where the IEP is completed prior to meeting with parents and receiving their input. It is especially discouraging for these parents to not only feel confused by the system, but then feel unappreciated and disrespected by the school system and teachers. Disregarding parent’s involvement means missing out on valuable information, as well as key partners and stakeholders in their children’s schooling (Chen, and Gregory, 2011).

In addition to feelings of inequality, parents face issues with unfair procedural safeguards (Valle, 2011). This is seen when parents choose to peruse further action if they feel the school is not meeting the needs of their child. However, choosing to pursue due process can be a huge financial burden on the parents and family, a lengthy experience, and once again the parents will encounter jargon, complicated legal forms, and an aggressive setting where the school system and parent are pitted against one another.

A final reason for low parental involvement is their dissatisfaction with the educational system, and the school itself. A study by Starr and Foy (2012) surveyed 144 parents whose children had ASD. The survey was done to investigate their perceptions of and satisfaction with the education their child was receiving. It was found that out of the total children sampled approximately 15 % had been suspended during their school career. The parents of these children felt that their child had been suspended because the school staff was not capable of dealing with the child’s behavior. While a child with ASD can display aggressive behaviors, parents felt that a suspension or being called to pick the child up was not the appropriate action taken by the school. The survey also revealed that nearly half of the parents were only “somewhat satisfied” or “dissatisfied” with the education their child was receiving. Parents gave reasons for their dissatisfaction being: low expectations for children with ASD, inappropriate programs and/or placement, and a lack of effective collaboration by teachers (Starr and Foy, 2012).

At this point the literature has helped identify at least three reasons for the low numbers of parental involvement, a lack of respect and knowledge by parents, unfair procedural safeguards, and dissatisfaction with the educational system and the child’s specific school. As a new special education system for the district, I see have observed with my own school decisions we have made that have resulted in pushing our parents to seek action from the district. Usually this happens not because of disagreements between the teacher and parent, but because the teacher does not have the resources or knowledge to meet the student’s needs. As a school targeting medically fragile students, the specific accommodations and modifications they need can be extensive, and the school is simply unable to provide teachers that have the resources and training for each specific case.

Increasing parental involvement would provide a huge benefit for the children with ASD and other learning disabilities. Despite the financial state, educational levels, and family structure, parental involvement has been shown to improve students’ academic achievements (Burke, 2013). High levels of parental involvement are linked with low dropout rates, and high graduation rates. In order to address the issue of parent’s knowledge of IEPs and the special education system, there has been a growth of special education advocates.

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These advocates are trained in special education laws and advocacy and work specifically with parents who are involved with matters in the school system. Advocates or even personally attending advocacy training is an option for parents to gain knowledge and an insider perspective in ensuring their child is placed in an appropriate program with proper services.

Another manner of increasing parental involvement is more of a social construct, and requires truly listening to parents concerns and input during occasions such as IEP meetings. While the parent does have some private responsibility to gain an understanding of laws and protocols, truly listening to the parents and addressing their concerns will open the lines of communication. Families who report high unmet needs typically feel a greater impact of the student's disability on the family (Brown, et.al. 2010). Therefore as educators it is especially important to observe how the parents describes the effect of the child's disability, the bigger the burden, the more they may feel the school system needs to provide. Parents' feelings should be validated, and then administrators and the IEP team can present parents with options and schools services. In addition, they may also provide information on outside resources such as community agencies or support groups.

A final suggestion to increase parental involvement, is educating parents on the specifics of their child's IEP. Having the student and the parents present at the IEP meeting will help clarify what accommodations the student needs in order to truly succeed in the classroom. Students who benefit from extended time need to be aware if they have this accommodation, and that their teachers make sure to allow them that additional time (Lovett, 2010). When parents are aware of the services their child is going to receive from the school, they can help their child develop self-advocacy skills and overall raise confidence levels. The open communication between parents and the school can only provide positive benefits, such as fulfillment of IDEA and high standard accomplishments by students with disabilities (Burke, 2013).

Personally, I feel that two suggestions stand out as being particularly helpful in improving parent involvement. The first requires gaining a background of the student and where the family comes from. Culture can play a huge part in how parents view disabilities, work with the school system, and even communicate. By forming these personal connections with parents, as a teacher you are showing a vested interest in the wellbeing of the child, something that every parent wants to see. Teaching is about more than a curriculum, it is helping the child develop socially, gain confidence, and learn real-life applicable skills.

It is also important to keep in mind that parents may be going through different stages of understanding and acceptance of their child's disability, but if they see your goal is truly to help the child succeed and in their best interest they are more likely to respond in a positive and helpful manner.

The second suggestion I have for fellow teachers is to create events at school that require parent participation. Parents may feel uncertain about how they can be more involved, so providing them specific opportunities may be very beneficial. Teachers can initiate a classroom-volunteer program, a classroom website with resources and information, and workshops on standardized testing and improving study skills at home. Making every effort to keep parents up to date with upcoming events and/ or concerns that may be arising should be a priority of every teacher. This will lead to parents that are active, involved participants in helping their child succeed academically.

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About the Author

Nicole Paez is a graduate student at Florida International University studying Special Education. Her teaching certifications include Special Education K-12, Social Sciences 6-12, Reading and ESOL endorsements, and upon graduation an endorsement for Autism. She currently works as a homebound/ hospital bound itinerant teacher for Miami-Dade County, working with students that are medically fragile, with varying disabilities. Her latest research project is an investigation on the implementation of transition skills for medically fragile students returning to the classroom.