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# Examining Parents' Involvement in and Perceptions of Special Education Services: An Interview with Families in a Parent Support Group

Sammy J. Spann, Frank W. Kohler, and  
Delann Soenksen

The purpose of this investigation was to examine families' involvement in and perceptions of children's special education services. A telephone survey was conducted with 45 families of children with autism who were part of a parent support group. The survey consisted of a total of 15 questions that pertained to the following areas: (a) the child's educational placement and type of special education services received, (b) the frequency and nature of parents' communication with school personnel, (c) parents' knowledge about and involvement in their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, and (d) parents' priorities for their child and overall satisfaction with school services. Results indicated that the majority of children spent part of their day in the general education classroom and received 1 to 2 special education services.

Parents' participation in education has been a topic of considerable interest and concern over the past 25 years. Family-school partnerships were the exception, rather than the norm, prior to the 1980s. Since that time, however, a growing amount of literature has suggested that parental involvement has a positive impact on children's learning and success in school (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Koegel, Koegel, & Schreibman, 1991; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Researchers have examined a wide range of issues in this area, including the reasons parents get involved in their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), teachers' concerns about parent involvement (Williams, 1992), and parents' preferences for communicating with school personnel (Loucks, 1992). This research has led to important

changes in the ways that schools view and interact with families (J. L. Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hepworth-Berger, 2000).

The topic of parental involvement has received even more attention in the field of special education. Prior to the 1980s, many parents were dependent on professionals for training and emotional support (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Because of changing federal legislation (i.e., 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), however, parents are now equal partners with school personnel, entitling them to access children's school records and participate in the design and evaluation of special education services. Research indicates that parent participation leads to a host of positive outcomes for children with special needs, including greater generalization and maintenance of treatment gains

(Koegel et al., 1991), greater continuity in intervention programs (Bailey & Wolery, 1989), higher levels of parent satisfaction (Stancin, Reuter, Dunn, & Bickett, 1984), and more effective strategies for resolving problems (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Along with these research findings, the field has produced a host of recommendations for how schools can develop partnerships with families, including engaging in quality communication, inviting parents to participate in school activities, soliciting parents' input on decisions about their child's education, and empowering parents to take action that addresses their own needs (Dunst, Trivette, & LaPointe, 1992; M. H. Epstein, Munk, Bursuck, Polloway, & Jayanthi, 1999; Kroeger, Leibold, & Ryan, 1999; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

Despite its need and importance, however, many parents have little or no involvement in children's special education services. Earlier studies have indicated that although parents attend their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting, they often have no involvement in developing objectives, interventions, or methods of evaluation (Goldstein, Strooland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, & Maxwell,

1978). For example, Lynch and Stein (1982) surveyed 400 parents about their involvement in IEP meetings. Although 71% of the participants reported active involvement in the meeting, only 14% provided specific recommendations or opinions. Similarly, Able-Boone, Goodwin, Sandall, Gordon, and Martin (1992) surveyed 290 parents about their involvement in early intervention services. Many parents reported that Independent Family Service Plans were not developed jointly with professionals and failed to reflect families' existing views and priorities.

Researchers have also examined parents' perceptions or satisfaction with special education services. For example, McWilliam et al. (1995) surveyed 539 parents regarding their roles in and satisfaction with early intervention services. Many families reported that they were not given choices and received services that were different from those requested. Covert (1995) examined the satisfaction of 78 families receiving intervention services in New Hampshire. Many families noted a lack of collaboration with professionals and indicated that they were not consulted when changes occurred in services. Kohler (1999) conducted a telephone interview with 25 parents of preschool- and school-age children with autism. More than half of these families reported that their school-based services were either ineffective or unrelated to their child's most pressing needs. Furthermore, 60% noted significant problems with communication, such as teachers' failing to listen and failing to keep parents updated on changes in their child's programs. Finally, Turnbull and Ruef (1997) interviewed 17 parents of children or youth who presented significant behavioral difficulties. Many parents expressed frustration with a teacher's poor communication skills and unwillingness to consider new ideas and perspectives.

Despite empirical support, theoretical justification, and legislative foundation, research has indicated that family involvement in and satisfaction with school-based services is often minimal. This may

be because families typically have traditional roles in services or because educators sometimes hold negative perceptions about families. For example, some educators believe that families are not credible sources of information (Gilliam & Coleman, 1981; McAfee & Vergason, 1979). Other sources have indicated that school personnel perceive families as adversarial and even dysfunctional (Powell, Hecimovic, & Christenson, 1993; Rosin, 1996; Salisbury & Dunst, 1997) or believe that involvement in educational services may place excessive demands on parents (Baker, 1989). Because of the potential consequences of these negative perceptions and relationships, there is a dire need to continue to examine relationships between schools and families of children in special education. The core elements of this relationship are communication, parent input in the IEP process, and parent satisfaction with school services.

The purpose of this investigation was to examine families' involvement and perceptions of children's special education services. This study involved 45 families of children with autism who were part of a parent support group. The study was designed to extend the existing research literature by addressing the following four questions:

1. What is the amount and nature of special education services that children receive from their school?
2. What is the frequency and quality of communication that parents have with teachers and other personnel at their child's school?
3. What is the nature of parents' knowledge about and involvement in their child's IEP process?
4. What is the nature of parents' priorities, and how much are they satisfied overall with their child's special education services?

## Method

### Participants

The parents of 45 children with autism or related pervasive developmental dis-

abilities participated in this study. The families resided in six different counties in a mideastern state. The children ranged in age from 4 to 18 years of age, and each had an IEP. Table 1 provides age and family demographic information about the children who participated in this study. The largest group consisted of children ages 6 to 9 years ( $n = 18$ ) followed by 4- to 5-year-olds ( $n = 11$ ), 10- to 14-year-olds ( $n = 10$ ), and 15- to 18-year-olds ( $n = 6$ ). As Table 1 shows, 71% of the children had one or two siblings, and the vast majority were from two-parent families (93%). Eight children in the youngest group attended public school preschools, and the other three children were enrolled in private programs. All children in the remaining age groups attended a public school.

All families were recruited through the assistance of a parent support group that served an estimated 500 members, including about 300 families of children with autism and related disabilities. Families were informed about the study by parent who coordinated support activities within their geographical region of the state. Given their initial agreement, the managers provided the research team with the names and telephone numbers of 57 parents in six different counties. We contacted families via telephone to inform them about the purpose of the study. Families who were willing to participate were mailed an informed consent form in a self-addressed stamped envelope. Following receipt of the signed form, the research team called the family to schedule a date and time for the telephone interview.

### Procedure and Instrumentation

An interview method was employed to learn about parents' involvement in and perceptions of the services they received from their child's school. On the basis of examining the existing literature, we developed a 15-item questionnaire around the four research questions mentioned earlier. This survey was a modification of one used by Kohler (1999) to examine

**TABLE 1**  
Participant Age and Family Information

Characteristic	Age group				Total
	4–5 yrs <sup>a</sup>	6–9 yrs <sup>b</sup>	10–14 yrs <sup>c</sup>	15–18 yrs <sup>d</sup>	
<b>Number of siblings</b>					
0	0	5	0	2	7 (16%)
1	5	5	7	2	19 (42%)
2	3	7	2	1	13 (29%)
3	3	1	1	1	6 (13%)
4 or more	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Number of parents in home</b>					
1	1	1	1	0	3 (7%)
2	10	17	9	6	42 (93%)

<sup>a</sup>n = 11. <sup>b</sup>n = 18. <sup>c</sup>n = 10. <sup>d</sup>n = 6.

families' receipt and perception of special education services. The 15-item questionnaire was field-tested by conducting pilot interviews with 10 different families prior to beginning the study. During this period, we refined the questions for clarity, determined the need to tape-record parents' answers, and established inter-rater agreement on parents' responses to each questionnaire item. Once this process was completed, we conducted telephone interviews with the individual families in this study. Each interview took 40 to 60 minutes to complete. All interviews were conducted with one parent, tape-recorded, and then summarized at a later time. The specific questions that were asked in each category are described in the following sections.

**Placement and Special Education Services.** Parents indicated whether their child was placed in the general or special education classroom (part- or full-time basis). In addition, parents were asked about their child's receipt of four different special education services from the school (i.e., paraprofessional or aide, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy services).

**Communication with School Personnel.** Parents were asked four questions related to home-school communication:

1. How often do you communicate with personnel at your child's school?
2. Who do you communicate with (teacher or aide, principal, other)?
3. What is a common reason for this communication (i.e., share information and concerns, solve problems related to the child, address disagreements or conflicts)?
4. What is your degree of satisfaction with home-school communication (low, moderate, or high)?

**IEP.** Parents responded to three questions related to their child's IEP:

1. What is your degree of knowledge with the IEP document (low, moderate, or high)?
2. What is your degree of involvement with the IEP document and meetings (low, moderate, or high)?
3. What is your overall degree of satisfaction with the IEP process (low, moderate, or high)?

**Priorities and Satisfaction with School Personnel/Services.** We asked three questions in this final category:

1. as a parent, what are your most pressing concerns/priorities for your child at this time? What skills or competencies does your child need the most help with?

2. To what extent are school personnel and/or services currently addressing these areas (low, moderate, or high)?
3. What is your overall level of satisfaction with the school's ability to address your child's needs (low, moderate, or high)?

Parents were also invited to share additional comments related to their concerns and satisfaction with the school.

**Interrater Agreement.** Interrater agreement was assessed by having two individuals independently listen to the same tape-recorded interview and then transcribe the parent's responses to all 15 questions. This assessment was conducted with a total of 13 parents (25% of total sample), including at least 20% of families of children in each age group. An agreement was scored when both individuals independently marked the same parent response to a given question. Interrater agreement was calculated by dividing the total number of agreements about a parent's response by the total number of agreements and disagreements. Interrater agreement on parents responses averaged 93% overall, with a mean of 88% to 96% across the four different age groups. The mean coefficient of agreement was 98% for questions about placement and types of services (range = 96%–100%, across age groups), 92% for communication (range = 88%–

93%, across age groups), 98% for questions about the IEP (range = 87%–100%, across groups), and 91% for questions about families' needs and priorities (range = 80%–100%, across age groups).

## Results

Four different results will be presented for the entire sample of 45 children, as well as for each individual age group. Information about children's educational placement and types of special education services are provided first. Second is a summary of parents' responses to the four questions about home–school communication. Parents' reports of involvement in their child's IEP document and meetings are summarized next. Fourth, parents' responses to the questions about their needs/priorities and overall satisfaction with the school is reported. Finally, we will provide a sample of verbatim comments that parents made related to their concerns and satisfaction with their child's existing school-based services.

### **Classroom Placement and Special Education Services**

Table 2 provides information about the placement and special services received by the 45 children in this study. As the

table shows, 73% of the children spent part of their day in a general education classroom. In fact, more than half of the children in each age group experienced some degree of inclusion; only 27% spent their entire day in a special education setting. Of the four services that we inquired about, speech therapy was most prevalent (73% of children), followed by paraprofessional services (55%), occupational therapy (40%), and physical therapy (7%). On the average, the individual children in this study received a mean of 1.37 services (range = 1.2–1.6 across age groups).

### **Communication with School Personnel**

Table 3 summarizes parents' responses to the four previously mentioned questions about communication with their child's school. As Table 3 shows, 100% of parents reported that they communicated with someone pivotal to their child's education. Conversely, only 13% stated that they interacted with the principal (range = 5%–33%, across groups), and 20% communicated with other school personnel, such as speech or physical therapists (range = 0%–36%). Fifty-one percent of parents indicated that they interacted with school personnel on a daily basis, and 31% reported that communication occurred one to three times a

week. Families whose children were in the first three age groups reported the highest frequency of communication, with the vast majority indicating that they talked or shared notes with educators at least once a week. Conversely, only 50% of parents whose children were in the 15- to 18-year-old group interacted with school personnel on a weekly basis, whereas 17% interacted on a bi-weekly basis and 33% talked or shared information less than two times per month. When asked about the nature of content of communication, 91% of parents reported that they shared information related to their child's progress or behavior at school. A majority of parents (75%) noted that they also brainstormed with school personnel to solve problems or issues that arose at either home or school (range = 33%–90%, across groups). Approximately one third of parents (31%) reported that communication sometimes centered on disagreements or conflicts. Parents whose children were 10 to 14 years old were especially notable in this area, with 50% indicating that they periodically had conflicts with school personnel. Finally, the majority of parents (82%) expressed moderate satisfaction with home–school communication, whereas 18% expressed low satisfaction. Parents whose children were in the 4- to 5-year-old group indicated the highest contentment, with 90% reporting high or mod-

**TABLE 2**  
Classroom Placement and Special Education Services Received by Children in Each Age Group

Placement/services	Age group				Total
	4–5 yrs <sup>a</sup>	6–9 yrs <sup>b</sup>	10–14 yrs <sup>c</sup>	15–18 yrs <sup>d</sup>	
<b>Type of classroom</b>					
General ed	9	12	7	5	33 (73%)
Special ed	2	10	3	3	18 (40%)
<b>Services received from school</b>					
Paraprofessional	4	11	6	4	25 (55%)
Speech therapy	7	14	7	2	30 (66%)
Occupational therapy	5	8	3	2	18 (40%)
Physical therapy	1	2	0	0	3 (7%)
Mean no. of services received	1.2	1.6	1.3	1.2	1.37

Note. Placement numbers add up to more than 100% because some children spent time in both types of classrooms.

<sup>a</sup>n = 11. <sup>b</sup>n = 18. <sup>c</sup>n = 10. <sup>d</sup>n = 6.

erate satisfaction. Conversely, one third of the parents whose children were 15 to 18 years old reported low satisfaction with communication, and none were highly satisfied.

## **IEP**

Table 4 summarizes parents' responses, by child's age group, to three questions

about the IEP process. The majority of parents (78%) believed that they had high to moderate knowledge of their child's IEP document. We also asked about parents' role or involvement in the IEP process, such as developing the document, participating in meetings, and contributing to planning and problem solving. More than half (56%) of the parents reported moderate levels of involve-

ment, whereas 33% and 11% indicated high and low involvement, respectively. Interestingly, parents whose children were in the two younger age groups reported greater involvement in the IEP process, whereas more parents whose children were in the 10- to 14- and 15- to 18-year-old groups indicated less input. Finally, 73% of parents reported moderate levels of satisfaction with the

**TABLE 3**  
Parent Responses to Questions About Communication with School Personnel

Question	Age group				
	4–5 yrs <sup>a</sup> (%)	6–9 yrs <sup>b</sup> (%)	10–14 yrs <sup>c</sup> (%)	15–18 yrs <sup>d</sup> (%)	Total (%)
<b>With whom do you communicate?</b>					
Teacher or paraprofessional	100	100	100	100	100
Principal	9	5	20	33	13
Other	36	22	10	0	20
<b>How often does communication occur?</b>					
Daily	45	50	70	33	51
1 to 3 times per week	55	27	20	17	31
Biweekly	0	0	0	17	2
Fewer than 2 times per month	0	23	10	33	16
<b>What is the nature of communication?</b>					
Share information	100	83	100	83	91
Discuss or solve problems	64	89	90	33	75
Address conflicts	36	17	50	33	31

<sup>a</sup>n = 11. <sup>b</sup>n = 18. <sup>c</sup>n = 10. <sup>d</sup>n = 6.

**TABLE 4**  
Summary of Parents' Responses to Questions About Their Child's IEP

Question	Age group				
	4–5 yrs <sup>a</sup> (%)	6–9 yrs <sup>b</sup> (%)	10–14 yrs <sup>c</sup> (%)	15–18 yrs <sup>d</sup> (%)	Total (%)
<b>Knowledge of IEP document</b>					
High	45	28	40	33	36
Moderate	36	39	40	34	37
Low	19	33	20	33	27
<b>Involvement in IEP process</b>					
High	46	39	10	17	28
Moderate	27	56	70	83	59
Low	27	5	20	0	13
<b>Overall satisfaction with IEP process</b>					
High	18	22	0	0	13
Moderate	55	72	80	83	73
Low	27	6	20	17	14

Note. IEP = Individualized Education Program.

<sup>a</sup>n = 11. <sup>b</sup>n = 18. <sup>c</sup>n = 10. <sup>d</sup>n = 6.

IEP process, and a comparable percentage (13%–14%) expressed high and low satisfaction with this process.

### **Priorities and Satisfaction with School-Based Personnel and Services**

Table 5 provides a summary of needs that parents identified for their children (more than one skill could be noted as a priority). Social interaction and communication skills were most prevalent, being identified by 51% and 42% of parents, respectively. Specific concerns in these categories included making friends and interacting with other children in school

and neighborhood activities. More than one fourth of the parents (29%) indicated that their child needed help with life skills such as dressing, cooking, toileting, bathing, and brushing teeth. Challenging behavior and job/vocational skills were a priority for 20% and 18% of parents, respectively, whereas 13% indicated that they would like their child to become involved in leisure or community activities, such as scouts and sports teams.

Table 6 provides a summary of parents' satisfaction with their child's school's ability to meet his or her most pressing needs. Interestingly, 44% of families indicated that schools were doing little or

nothing to address these needs, whereas 29% and 27% believed that schools were expending moderate and high degrees of effort, respectively. Overall, parents of children in the younger age groups believed that schools were doing more to address their child's needs than did parents of the older students. In fact, 83% of parents of children in the oldest age group believed that schools were doing little or nothing to address their child's needs. Table 6 also summarizes parents' satisfaction with the school efforts to address their child's needs. About one fourth of the parents expressed high satisfaction, and 47% indicated moderate levels of contentment. However, 29% of

**TABLE 5**  
Summary of Parents' Most Pressing Priorities for Their Children

Skill	Age group				Total
	4–5 yrs <sup>a</sup>	6–9 yrs <sup>b</sup>	10–14 yrs <sup>c</sup>	15–18 yrs <sup>d</sup>	
Social	3	10	7	3	23 (51%)
Communication	5	8	5	1	19 (42%)
Life (e.g., dressing, cooking)	1	5	4	3	13 (29%)
Decreasing challenging behavior	2	6	1	0	9 (20%)
Vocational	1	2	1	4	8 (18%)
Leisure activities	0	1	2	3	6 (13%)

Note. Numbers represent parents who chose the skill as a priority. More than one skill could be noted as a priority.

<sup>a</sup>n = 11. <sup>b</sup>n = 18. <sup>c</sup>n = 10. <sup>d</sup>n = 6.

**TABLE 6**  
Summary of Parents' Satisfaction with the School's Ability to Meet Their Child's Needs

Question	Age group				Total (%)
	4–5 yrs <sup>a</sup> (%)	6–9 yrs <sup>b</sup> (%)	10–14 yrs <sup>c</sup> (%)	15–18 yrs <sup>d</sup> (%)	
To what extent is the school working on these priorities now?					
Considerable	36	28	30	0	27
Moderate	28	39	20	17	29
Little or none	36	33	50	83	44
What is your level of satisfaction with the school's ability to address and meet these needs?					
High	36	28	10	16	24
Moderate	45	55	50	17	47
Low	19	17	40	67	29

<sup>a</sup>n = 11. <sup>b</sup>n = 18. <sup>c</sup>n = 10. <sup>d</sup>n = 6.

parents expressed low satisfaction, and nearly half of parents of 10- to 14- and 15- to 18-year-olds noted that they were not satisfied with school's efforts.

### **Summary of Parents' Verbatim Comments**

Figure 1 provides a sample of verbatim comments that parents made regarding satisfaction with school personnel and/or services. A number of positive comments focused on teachers' willingness to accommodate children's academic and/or social needs. One parent was impressed that her child was treated like other students in the school, and another was pleased that her child participated in peer tutoring on a regular basis. A number of parents also expressed negative comments, however. As Figure 1 shows, other comments focused on teachers' lack of compassion, poor attitudes, and inability to address children's needs.

### **Discussion**

This study examined parents' involvement in and perceptions of their child's special education services. A telephone survey was conducted with 45 families of children with autism who were enrolled in a preschool or public school. The results of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. The majority of children spent part of their day in the general education classroom and received one to two different services.
2. Many families reported that they communicated with the school on a regular basis and that this interaction focused on a variety of different topics.
3. The majority of parents believed that they were moderately to highly knowledgeable about and involved in their child's IEP process.

4. Parents identified a host of pressing needs for their children, and many reported that schools were not doing enough to address these priorities.

First, we found that 73% of children spent some portion of their day in general education classrooms. Many parents reported that they advocated for inclusion because they wanted their child to have access to the same activities and opportunities as other students. The children in this study received an average of 1.37 special education services, with speech therapy being most prevalent. This is not surprising, given that delayed social and communication skills are the core or primary characteristic of autism (Fein, Pennington, Markowitz, Braverman, & Waterhouse, 1986; Trepagnier, 1996). More than half of the children also had access to a paraprofessional at school. This was also expected, given that 73% spent some portion of their day in general education classrooms. Parents reported that speech, occupational, and physical therapy generally occurred one to two times per week, for a total of about 60 min each week.

Results indicated that home-school communication occurred on a regular basis and usually involved the child's teacher or paraprofessional. Unfortunately, we did not inquire about parents' communication with each individual teacher (general education teacher, special educator, and paraprofessional). However, our examination of the tapes indicated that parents made most reference to their child's paraprofessional and special education teacher. Conversely, few parents made reference to the general education teacher in their discussion of home-school communication. Parents reported that this correspondence took a variety of forms, including face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, and written notes. The most common impetus for communication was exchanging information related to the child's needs and performance. For example, several parents reported that they exchanged notes with the teacher to stay informed about the child's performance (e.g., "Billy told me all about the class field trip when he

#### **Positive Comments**

The teachers encourage my child to socialize with other children in the school.  
 The longer my child is there, the better they get at addressing his needs.  
 The school has done very well at keeping open lines of communication with me.  
 My child's teachers have been concerned and compassionate.  
 The teacher has been willing to listen and is open to my suggestions.  
 The school got my child interested in math and was adapted the curriculum for his needs.  
 The school does a nice job at treating him like all other students.  
 Older students come in and tutor my child every day. It's a great way to promote socialization.  
 The teachers do their best for my child, despite being understaffed and having few resources.

#### **Comments Reflecting Dissatisfaction or Concern**

The staff should be educated about autism and how to teach these children.  
 My child needs to have more opportunities to interact with nondisabled children.  
 The teachers forget that my child is a human being.  
 They think that my child should sit around and vegetate all day.  
 The school needs to be better at giving parents information and support.  
 The teachers have no compassion for my child or for me as a parent.  
 I have to pay for private tutoring because the school will not meet his needs.  
 The teachers need to be better at picking up on my child's frustration.

**FIGURE 1.** Sample of parents' verbatim comments about their child's school.

got home yesterday," "James did really well with peer tutoring during math today"). Another typical form of communication involved brainstorming to solve problems that arose at home or school. Several parents described instances where the teacher called them to discuss a problem that their child was having difficulty with a school routine. Many families also reported conflicts. These disagreements centered on a variety of issues, including differences in opinion on how to address a behavior problem and the school's failure to reply to a parent's question or request on the same day. A number of parents indicated that they did most of the work to maintain correspondence with school personnel (e.g., "Communication is a one way street," "I have to do all of the initiating," "The only time the teacher sends me a note is when there is a problem"). One parent lamented that the only time she communicated with her child's teacher was at quarterly IEP meetings. Despite these and similar concerns, however, more than 80% of families expressed high to moderate satisfaction with the communication that they had with their child's school.

Another focus of our survey was related to the IEP process. The majority of parents believed that they were adequately informed about and involved in this process. Numerous parents noted that their level of knowledge and involvement had increased as their child grew older. Several individuals stated that they were unable to contribute to the development of the IEP because this document had been written prior to the meeting. Another parent stated that she was the only one at a recent IEP meeting who did not have a personal copy of the document. Two parents claimed that school personnel were not making a serious effort to address the goals in the IEP document. Despite these comments, a large proportion of families reported that they were highly to moderately satisfied with how the IEP was handled.

One compelling outcome of this study was the information on parents' priorities for their children. Numerous parents stated that they wanted their child to play

with classmates, have friends, and be invited to birthday parties and similar social functions. Several parents expressed a desire for their child to have better language skills so that they (and other family members) could communicate with him or her more successfully. Although social skills were a prevalent need for all four groups, vocational and leisure skills were more common among the 10- to 14- and 15- to 18-year-old groups. Unfortunately, we received limited information about the nature of each child's disability. Although we know that 73% of children spent some portion of their day in the general education classroom, we have no information about the extent or severity of each child's individual needs. This information would have been helpful in interpreting parents' perceptions that schools were not doing enough to address their children's priorities. The information gathered is important for families of children with autism because children with autism have greater needs than do most children with other disabilities, placing more importance on home-school collaboration. Perhaps the most daunting outcome was parents' perceptions of whether school personnel were currently addressing their child's most pressing needs. Nearly half of those interviewed (44%) believed that schools were doing little or nothing in this area. This was especially apparent with the 10- to 14- and 15- to 18-year-old groups, as 50% and 83% of their parents, respectively, reported that the school's efforts were minimal or nonexistent. These perceptions were reflected in comments such as "The teachers think that my child should sit around and vegetate all day," "My child needs to have more opportunities to interact with nondisabled children," and "The staff need to be educated on autism and how to teach these children." Numerous parents were surprised by our inquiry into their priorities and stated that nobody had ever asked them that question before.

One interesting finding was that there were different levels of satisfaction among families of children in various age groups. As a group, parents of older children reported lower levels of satisfaction

with home-school communication, involvement in the IEP process, and the school's ability to address their child's needs. Perhaps teachers of younger and older students display qualitative differences in their compassion and willingness to accommodate children's individual needs. At the same time, it is possible that parents of older students had engaged in a greater number of conflicts with school personnel. This could lead to these parents' having unreasonable expectations and a cynical belief that teachers are not able to show care and concern for their children. In any case, additional research should examine this issue in more detail. Of primary interest is whether the quality of special education practices truly changes as children grow older, whether parents develop different expectations and perceptions of schools as children grow older, or both.

The present investigation supports and extends the existing research literature in several important ways. A host of prior studies have examined the quality of communication between service providers and families of children with disabilities, parents' involvement in the IEP process, and families' perceptions and satisfaction (e.g., Dinnebeil & Rule, 1994; Dunst, Johanson, Rounds, Trivette, & Hamby, 1992; Kohler, 1999; McWilliam et al., 1998). Like prior researchers, we found that parents are generally satisfied with the quality of their children's special education services (Green & Shinn, 1994; Leyser, 1988). However, this study examined a wider range of outcomes than did many previous investigations. For example, we addressed multiple dimensions of home-school communication, parental involvement in the IEP process, and parents' perceptions of whether school personnel were addressing their children's most pressing needs. What emerges is a picture of family-school relationships that is both comprehensive and complex (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Furthermore, the areas addressed in this study may be highly related or interdependent. For example, a school's ability to address the skills/priorities that a parent considers most important may depend on the quality of home-school

communication as well as a parent's involvement in the IEP process. Future research should continue to encompass multiple measures in order to examine the quality of families' relationships with schools.

The present investigation also has several limitations. First is the small and limited sample of parents who participated in our interview ( $N = 45$ ). Future studies should involve not only a larger sample but also children who display a wider range of disabilities. It may well be that our population of children with autism is not representative of other children who receive special education services (e.g., gifted and talented, visually or hearing impaired, learning disabled). Finally, there is also some question about whether our sample is representative of families of children with autism. All parents in this study were members of a parent support group that served approximately 300 families in the state. These families received regular information related to their child's disability, best educational practices, and parents' rights and entitlements under the law. This information was distributed through a quarterly newsletter, several annual workshops, direct links to other parents as well as a geographical manager, monthly parent and sibling support meetings, and Web sites. Given this network, we suspect that the families in this study were better informed about and active in their children's schools than families who were not part of a support group. If so, then the results of this investigation are not reflective of families who lack involvement in parent support groups. In any case, future studies should include families from a broader range of areas and backgrounds.

Another limitation of this study is that we did not address the perceptions of school personnel. A number of prior studies have found that parents and service providers hold different perceptions about collaborative relationships and the effectiveness of early intervention services (Dinnebeil, Hale, & Rule, 1996). It is highly likely that parents and school personnel hold different perspectives about the nature of their communication, parents' involvement in the IEP,

and schools' efforts to address children's needs. Future studies should examine and compare the perceptions of both of these groups.

In summary, the purpose of this study was to examine parents' involvement and perceptions of their child's services. Results indicated that families and schools communicated on a regular basis and for a variety of different reasons. Furthermore, the majority of parents believed that they were moderately to highly knowledgeable and involved in their child's IEP process but reported that schools were not doing enough to address their child's most pressing needs. Although these findings support prior research, they also raise a number of issues and questions for further exploration. Research that continues to examine parents' relationships with school personnel may ultimately ensure the best possible services for children with autism and other disabilities.

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#### AUTHORS' NOTES

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