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Feeding a child with autism spectrum disorder: Learning from mothers' experiences

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Introduction

Client centred care is one of the core tenets of occupational therapy practice. As clinicians we need to hear and respond to the voices of our clients in order to understand their needs. Feeding is an essential component of the occupation of parenting. This study allowed mothers to share their challenges and strategies in feeding their child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to develop in-depth knowledge directly relevant to clinical practice by understanding the feeding process from the mothers' perspective. The research questions were: For mothers, what is the process of feeding their child with ASD from infancy to school age? What challenges do they face? What strategies have been used? How do mothers perceive the role of consulting professionals including occupational therapists?

Methods

This study used a constructivist grounded theory approach. Participants were ten mothers of children aged four to ten years with a diagnosis of ASD and feeding challenges. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed (Charmaz, 2006).

Results

Results are presented as themes derived from the interviews and field note data. Various creative feeding strategies and the mothers' decision making process in choosing strategies were reported. Themes included mothers' and fathers' roles, impact on family and extended family, decisions around use of reinforcers, and the needs of parents to be understood and respected by professionals. Mothers reported the feeding process to be all-consuming, and the need for ongoing persistence to achieve positive results. Personal values, attitudes and philosophies guided the strategies that mothers chose.

Conclusion

Preliminary data analysis suggests there is no one standardized intervention for feeding difficulties in ASD. An individualized approach needs to be based on the child's needs and the family's beliefs and values, offered within a trusting, mutually respectful parent-professional relationship.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy

Mothers described numerous creative strategies and more importantly the decision making process around her choice of strategies used to feeding her child with ASD. This work will support the occupational therapist in meeting the needs of this challenging population.