

The Living with Autism Study: The Occupational Therapist's Role in Supporting Families with Autism

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Introduction: The Living with Autism Study surveyed over 2,500 individuals in families with children up to age 30 years old. Approximately one third of the families had children who were typically developing and two thirds were families living with autism. This is the first large study of its kind focused on how living with autism impacts families as compared to families with typically developing children.

Objectives: 1) Describe the ongoing, critical lifelong challenges experienced by people living with autism and their families, specifically financial needs, preferences for access to information, identification of service needs and the need for additional program funding. 2) Identify ways that occupational therapists may advance program development and expand their practices to include the service needs of people with autism and their families.

Description: The Living with Autism Study revealed that parents of children with autism spectrum disorders are extremely concerned about their child's independence, financial well-being, quality of life and their employment options.

Discussion: The increasing number of children identified with autism, underscores the importance that occupational therapists develop the knowledge and expertise to address the needs and experiences of these families. By learning to work with the individuals with autism and their families to address the typical behavioral, social and communication interventions, occupational therapists can then engage clients in occupational behaviors that support participation in daily life situations, including activities of daily living (dressing feeding and toileting), IADL's (money management, housework and meal preparation) as well as vocational and prevocational skills.

Conclusion: Occupational therapists need to understand the unique needs and challenges of families living with autism. The outcomes of this study help occupational therapists recognize priorities articulated by parents and project future opportunities for practitioners. The focus on the occupational needs of families and individuals with autism will influence occupational therapy's future practice and ultimately consumer's everyday lives throughout their lifespans.

Contributions to occupational therapy practice: This informative study will help practitioners understand the priorities of families who have children with autism and plan for more comprehensive services to meet those needs.