

The Reported Experiences of Occupational Therapists and Board Certified Behavior Analysts in Early Intervention

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Abstract:

This qualitative research study examined the experiences of interprofessional collaboration, specifically between occupational therapists (OTs) and board certified behavior analysts (BCBAs), for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the early intervention (EI) setting. The purpose of this study was to determine if and when collaboration occurs by conducting in depth semi-structured interviews with these providers. Two major themes emerged from these interviews: open communication leads to effective idea exchange and communication barriers. Through engaging in collaboration, practitioners will be able to provide best practice and enable the child to reach his/her fullest potential.

Objectives:

- To assess collaborative efforts between OTs and BCBAs in the EI setting.
- To identify pros and cons of collaboration
- To understand why collaboration does or does not occur

Background Information:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):

- A neurodevelopmental disorder that affects social functioning, such as communication and behavior.

Early Intervention:

- Early intervention (EI) services may be provided to children from birth to age 2 with developmental delays.
- EI in both applied behavior analysis (ABA) and occupational therapy may increase functional daily life skills for children with ASD.
- ABA is effective in reducing disruptive and inappropriate behaviors, increasing communication and social interactions, and learning in children with ASD (3).
- Occupational therapists (OTs) work with individuals diagnosed with ASD in natural settings that closely resemble their everyday activities. OTs help set milestones to integrate individuals with ASD in age appropriate activities that are stimulating and appropriate for their development by evaluating motor, sensory and cognitive skills (1).

Interprofessional Collaboration:

- Evidence has shown that interprofessional collaboration is seen to be valuable for children with ASD in elementary school and will lead to the best possible outcome (2; 4), however, there is little known about the collaboration of both professions with children with ASD in EI.
- The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the experiences of both professionals through in depth semi-structured interviews. These semi-structured interviews were then analyzed for emergent themes to better understand the collaboration efforts that exist amongst these two professions.

Design and Methods:

Participants:

- Participants were recruited and screened based on:
 - New York State early intervention providers status
 - Working in the NYC area
 - Registered, licensed OT's or BCBA's with at least 1 year of experience in the EI field
- 2 OT's and 1 BCBA participated

Interview Process:

- Upon receiving consent, interviews were held, with two researchers per participant, over the phone.
- The researchers remained neutral and objective as they held the interviews through asking scripted questions which were open ended.
- Questions were reframed and repeated to redirect the interviewees on topic and enable them to elaborate on domains of interest in order to enhance credibility.
- At the end of the interview, the purpose of the study was restated, and an explanation was given of how the information gathered during the process will be used.

Coding the data:

- The data was transcribed into Microsoft Excel, and then coded.
- Each researcher independently coded the data during data analysis.
- After each transcript was reviewed for coding topics, the established codes were grouped based upon similarities in their subject matter.
- Researchers came together and recoded the data as a team in order to enhance dependability.
- The codes were grouped into two major themes.

Results:

Two major themes emerged from the qualitative study:

Open Communication Leads to Effective Idea Exchange:

There are often multiple therapists from various disciplines that provide treatment to children that qualify for EI. When collaboration occurs, the therapists are able to exchange ideas with each other and adjust their treatment planning allowing them to be on the same page during treatment sessions. The therapists all expressed how simple, verbal, communication between the therapists is crucial to treating the child. Some methods of collaboration expressed include the use of communication books, group texts, and group meetings.

Barriers to Communication:

According to the participants, even though collaboration is viewed to be beneficial, and various methods were discussed to initiate this collaboration, there are still aspects that serve as barriers to communication amongst the therapists. Speaking to and collaborating with various therapists requires a lot of extra time on the practitioner's side and often times, practitioners have difficulty finding this time.

Discussion:

This study highlighted the apparent gap that exists in the collaboration between OTs and BCBAs for children with ASD in EI.

- Communication should happen on a frequent basis between all the therapists of various disciplines.
- Therapists value the opinions of their coworkers, but due to multiple variables, this does not always occur. Specific methods such as communication books, group chats, and scheduled meetings may be decided on in order to keep the family and therapists on the same page.

Open communication between OTs and BCBAs is not a reality, and children are not being serviced in the best way possible.

- Best practice isn't being met due to realities such as time constraints and busy schedules.
- Therapists are not allowed to bill on the same hour for one specific child, so essentially there is no strong incentive for the therapist to wait for the next therapist's session.
- Collaboration between the interdisciplinary team is not frequently mandated. Collaboration occurs at the discretion of the therapists on the team, which therefore may or may not occur.
- By educating professionals on the benefits of collaboration and the positive impacts it has on clients, therapists may be more proactive in collaborating with other team members.

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