

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

A Qualitative Study of Parent to Parent Programs

Ainbinder, J.G., Blanchard, L.W., Singer, G.H., Sullivan, M.E., Powers, L.K., Marquis, J.G., & Santelli, B. (1998). A qualitative study of Parent to Parent support for parents of children with special needs. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 23(2), 99-109.

BOTTOM LINE

Researchers interviewed 24 parents involved in Parent to Parent programs in five states. Parents shared their opinions of what was and was not helpful about their Parent to Parent program, how it compared with other types of support, and whether they would recommend it. Parent to Parent support is helpful when parents experience perceived sameness, similar ways of gaining practical skills, availability of support, and mutual support. It is not helpful when parents experience situational and individual differences or logistical barriers that end a match prematurely or prevent it from starting.

Beach Center on Disability

Making a Sustainable Difference in Quality of Life



ACTION STEPS

- Recognize that Parent to Parent programs can be valuable to parents who want to be connected to others who have “been there,” having had similar experiences with a child with a disability.
- If you are interested in exploring this type of support, seek a Parent to Parent program that provides training to veteran parents and that follows up to make sure that matches are working.
- If you are involved in organizing and running a Parent to Parent program, recognize that training for veteran parents should include discussions of situational and individual differences, teaching how to assess the compatibility and effectiveness of a match, and teaching strategies for dealing with individual differences or conflicts.

Parent to Parent offers a unique form of assistance that is not typically met by the formal service system. Getting help from someone who shares a common experience provides an additional dimension that counseling or other professional services cannot meet.

KEY FINDINGS

- Parent to Parent support was particularly helpful when perceived similarities between the veteran and newly referred parent led to the development of a mutually beneficial relationship. This relationship, in which each parent is defined as a “reliably ally,” represented four unique characteristics of Parent to Parent support:
 - ◆ *Perceived sameness.* The parents’ perceptions of similarities in the situation of both children and/or the parents’ personalities helped create a sense of understanding and compassion that generally doesn’t exist in their other relationships.
 - ◆ *A comfortable way to gain practical skills and information.* Parents reported that they believed they received trustworthy practical tips and information, as well as links to other supports and services from supporting parents.
 - ◆ *Availability of support.* Referred parents reported a sense of dependability, knowing that the support parent was available if and when needed.
 - ◆ *Mutual support.* The relationship was equitable, so both parents became providers and receivers of support. Parents described a sense of satisfaction in someone valuing their expertise and stressed the importance of giving as well as receiving support.
- Not all parents reported helpful experiences with their Parent to Parent program; however, many were eager to try again with a different supporting parent. All but one said they would

recommend the program. The main complaints were logistical barriers and inherent differences between support and referred parents

- ◆ *Logistical barriers.* Barriers that ended matches prematurely included parents' busy lives, long distances between matched parents, lost phone numbers, and negligence on the part of a support parent to follow-up with the referred parent. The limited number of available support parents with similar situations could prevent matches from starting and leave referred parents disappointed and waiting for a match.
- ◆ *Situational and individual differences.* Unsuccessful Parent to Parent matches were frequently attributed to differences in children's situations (different diagnoses that resulted in different types of day-to-day challenges). Even more crucial were individual preferences and values. Regardless of situational similarities, an effective match required some basic connection between the two parents' parenting preferences and values.

METHOD

- Researchers conducted interviews with 24 participants in Parent to Parent programs in five states. Twenty-three mothers and one father — representative of the general population involved in Parent to Parent support — described their experiences with the program.
- The parents shared their opinions about what was and was not helpful about the program, how it compared with other types of support they received, and whether or not they would recommend it to other parents.
- Researchers coded the interview transcripts into categories and compared notes to reach agreement about categories.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Santelli, B., Turnbull, A.P., Marquis, J., & Lerner, E. (1995). Parent to Parent programs: A unique form of mutual support. *Infants and Young Children, 8*(2), 48-57.

Santelli, B., Turnbull, A.P., Sergeant, J., Lerner, E., & Marquis, J. (1996). Parent to Parent: Parent preferences for supports. *Infants and Young Children, 9*(1), 53-62.

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