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The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC)

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. Taking a whole-of-life approach to autism focusing on diagnosis, education and adult life, Autism CRC researchers are working with end-users to provide evidence-based outcomes which can be translated into practical solutions for governments, service providers, education and health professionals, families and people on the autism spectrum.

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1. Purpose of the project

Children on the autism spectrum have known difficulties at school which may lead to anxiety and affect school connectedness and learning outcomes. Effective communication and increased engagement with parents is related to reduced issues with bullying at school and can be harnessed to help address problems. So children's capacity to effectively communicate about school experiences is important. However, they may struggle to converse about events at school and how to tackle them.

The "How was your day?" project aimed to explore the nature of home communication about the school day in families with children on the spectrum compared with children not on the spectrum. It set out to first, investigate parent, teacher and child perceptions concerning home communication about the school day, and secondly to video-record and analyse actual family interactions with children after school. We were particularly interested in whether children related stories about their experiences at school and whether parents and children engaged in discussion of possible alternative scenarios in talking about school experiences. We were also interested in whether communication about school was or was perceived to be difficult, and in where communication breakdowns occurred in talking about the school day.

2. Project description

The project was conducted in two parts. In Part 1 of the project, conducted in 2016-2017, 21 families of primary school aged children attending mainstream schools in Victoria and Queensland agreed to participate. First, purpose-designed surveys for parents and teachers, and structured interviews with the children, were used to investigate their perceptions about home communication about the school day. Second, parents were asked to make video-recordings of their after school interactions with their children. The children were all aged between 8-12, usually in grades 4-6. Eleven families with children on the autism spectrum (mean age 9.2 years) and ten families of children not on the spectrum (mean age 10.2 years) took part. All parents completed the parent survey, seven teachers returned the teacher survey, and 19 of the children took part in the video-recorded semi-structured interview. Approximately 50 hours of video-recorded interaction was collected from the participants, with each family recording after school conversation on at least two days of the week and over at least two distinct periods of time. Typical locations for recordings to be done included in the car on the drive home from school, during after school snack time and at dinner later in the evening. Halfway through the week, parents were provided with a prompt to use

in talking to their child about their day and asked to record an interaction with the child using this prompt. The prompt included the following questions: Tell me, how was your day?; Can you tell me what you did at school?; What is the best thing you did?; Can you tell me about it?; Was there anything you did not like?; Can you tell me about it?

After preliminary analysis of the data from Part 1, we developed Part 2 of the project which was an online version of the parent survey intended to collect a larger number of responses, and this took place in 2017-2018. The final participant group for Part 2 consisted of 41 participants who were parents of children who were not on the spectrum, and 234 participants who were parents of children who were on the spectrum. The divergent participant numbers in each group were managed statistically for quantitative analyses.

All parents in both Parts of the project were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and diagnosis with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was confirmed using the Social Communication Questionnaire (Lifetime).

3. Summary of findings

3.1 Perceptions about communication about school

Survey data from Part 1 and Part 2 of the project was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Parents of children not on the spectrum reported significantly more conversations about positive aspects of school while parents of children on the spectrum were more likely to report a lack of talk about positives and to characterise these conversations as difficult. Both groups reported more difficulty in talk about problematic topics, but with significantly more parents of children on the spectrum flagging that these conversations are always very difficult. There was less difference between the two groups of parents in how frequently children would talk about problems at school: both groups of parents reported that their children could be reticent and reluctant to revisit negative events, whether because these are emotionally challenging or to avoid blame if things have gone wrong. This aligns with what children told us in their interviews – many children, whether on the spectrum or not, expressed reluctance to talk about negative aspects of school. We also observed this in the video-recorded conversations about school, where a number of children overtly refused to talk about problems in their after school interactions with parents, or needed careful handling before they would eventually reveal what had happened.

Children on the spectrum were more likely to be said to exhibit painful emotions of upset, anger or frustration due to issues at school or difficulties communicating about them. Partly, parents

considered this to be due to a more global difficulty experienced in communicating with these children or that the children had difficulty expressing their story or how they were feeling. Parents of children on the spectrum report having to work hard to manage the conversation and to find out what has happened, which one parent commented is “like putting a puzzle together”. The work parents put into communicating with their child on the spectrum was reflected in the range of strategies parents reported they used.

Parents of children on the spectrum were more likely to report their child was negative (nervous or anxious) about going to school while parents of children not on the spectrum generally reported their child to be positive about school. The video-recorded interactions of after school conversations are consistent with these findings, in that of the 21 children participating in this study, the children who are not on the spectrum as a group were more likely to speak positively about school in the interactions recorded: six out of ten were generally positive, and none were predominantly negative about school although some significant negative events and concerns came up in discussion. In contrast, three of the children on the spectrum were generally negative about school, while the other eight had mixed reactions and none were predominantly positive.

Parents of children on the spectrum indicated significantly higher frequency of bullying, and although almost the same frequency of references to bullying arose in the open-ended questions for the two groups of parents, the parents of children on the spectrum reported more serious incidents. Parents of children not on the spectrum made more reference to strategizing with their child about what to do. However, both groups of parents indicated that they brainstormed with their child about school and there were no significant differences in reported frequencies for brainstorming about problems at school. The video-recorded conversations included examples of children and parents in both groups talking through and processing the events of the school day, including in particular negative or problematic experiences.

There were highly significant differences between the groups of parents in their perceptions of how easy or difficult it was to communicate with their child about school. Overall, parents of children not on the spectrum reported that it was always easy to communicate with their child about school and there were no problems with this. More parents of children on the spectrum reported difficulties with communication about school – nevertheless, around 25% of these parents indicated no or few problems communicating about the school day and 34% gave a middling response. These results and this range of variation is consistent with our findings from qualitative analysis of actual recorded after school conversations with children.

In comparison to the parents, the small number of teachers who responded to the survey in Part 1 of the project reported relatively few difficulties over communication about school and made generally positive assessments of the children's behaviour. Both parents and teachers reported minimal bullying of the children, but teachers reported bullying less frequently than parents.

Preliminary qualitative analysis of the interviews with the children reveals a tendency for social and relational aspects of school (friends and "mean kids") to be mentioned as both positive and negative among the non-autistic group, whereas although some of the children on the spectrum talked in the interview (as well as in their after school chat) about friends, they tended to focus more on the institutional, rule-based aspects of school as negative. The children not on the spectrum were much more likely to talk about sharing bad things with their friends.

3.2 Video-recorded conversations about school

The video-recorded conversations were indexed for those parts of the conversation where school was a topic of conversation, and approximately 11 hours of extracts were transcribed in detail for analysis. These extracts were analysed qualitatively using the method of Conversation Analysis to reveal patterns of interaction.

All the families did talk about school at the end of the school day, and all the target children participated in such conversations. There was, however, a very wide range of variation in how easily these conversations flowed, in the amount of talk about school which occurred during the recorded interactions, and in the quality of information which parents and carers were able to glean about the school day from them. The following themes arose from our analysis.

Factors favouring or disfavouring easy conversation about the school day

After school conversations about the school day were affected by factors such as: whether the conversation took place immediately after school, when many children appeared less responsive; the presence of multiple children; and the children's access to electronic devices. When the parent was able to set aside a space of time with just the target child (often in the context of the prompt questions session), the conversation usually flowed much more freely. A number of parents commented that use of the prompt questions led to a much greater and freer exchange of information about school than usual. It was evident that many children in both groups were reluctant to talk about what happened at school if this related to negative experiences or incidents, and parents needed to carefully manage the discussion for the story to come out.

Working hard to get a response from children

All after school conversations included questions by parents of the target child, and children's responses varied greatly. Eight of the eleven children on the spectrum, but only one child not on the spectrum, notably often did not respond to questions about school or responded with delayed, minimal or problematic answers. In general the children not on the spectrum were more inclined to volunteer information, often in the context of a previous question or discussion, and in some cases to ask a question or initiate a topic. However some children in the group on the spectrum also initiated some discussion or volunteered some information. Many of the children in the study told stories about school during their after school interactions, and most of the children not on the spectrum produced a range of short narratives about school with only one child not telling any. Only three children on the spectrum produced a substantial number of accounts, with four producing a small number of short narratives and four producing no narratives about school.

Talk about the future and hypotheticals

In each group of participants, roughly 70% of the children and their parents engaged in hypothetical discussion about school including potential discussion of how to handle difficult situations, although this occurred in more limited ways for children on the spectrum.

4. Conclusions and implications

Overall, the project reveals clear differences in the lived experience of the two groups of parents and of their children both in their experience of schooling and in their experience of communicating about it. The project has shown that parents of children on the spectrum perceive themselves to be working hard to communicate with their children about the school day, and analysis of the parent surveys as well as of actual conversations about school, show some of the ways in which parents of these children need to work harder. For example they monitor their child's mood and use strategies to gain an understanding of school events, especially negative events, in the face of reluctance to talk or minimal answers to questions.

The results from this project could inform the development of approaches to facilitate conversations about school between children on the spectrum and their parents as a preventative measure to minimize the impact of negative events at school. Some parents reported that use of the question prompts was helpful, particularly when they were able to speak to the target child alone in a quiet place. Interviews with the children showed them to have strong opinions about when it is good to share negative experiences and with whom, and these could usefully be further explored.

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Our values

**Inclusion**

Working together with those with the lived experience of autism in all we do

**Innovation**

New solutions for long term challenges

**Independence**

Guided by evidence based research, integrity and peer review

**Cooperation**

Bringing benefits to our partners; capturing opportunities they cannot capture alone



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