

Voices from the Field: Service Providers' Experiences Supporting Indigenous Families of Autistic Children

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INTRODUCTION

Indigenous parents experience compounded challenges when accessing autism services for their children in Canada. While service providers play a crucial role in facilitating families' access to supports and addressing service disparities, few studies have examined their perspectives. Addressing this gap can provide insight into the challenges service providers face when supporting Indigenous families and inform the development of tailored services and supports that better meet their needs. The current study sought to address the following research questions: (1) What challenges do service providers encounter when working with Indigenous families? (2) What are effective strategies for collaborating with and engaging Indigenous families?

METHODS

Seven service providers with at least one year of experience working with Indigenous families of autistic children in Ontario, were purposefully recruited for participation. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data.

RESULTS

CHALLENGES

THEME 1: Geographic isolation and accessibility

When you go up the coast it's much more difficult to get parents to come in, and part of that is infrastructure or just demographics. And then getting access to the parents can sometimes be difficult because some of them have no Wi-fi or have no telephone access. Sending a letter is a waste of time because many of them don't get the letters to remind them about appointments. It's just exceptionally difficult to deliver services the further up the coast you go.

THEME 2: Historical trauma and its impact

Depending on how long a family has lived in the community they may have very negative connotations with anything related to the government. So, when I explain there's a program to help children with autism and it's through the Ontario government, they're like, 'Oh well, what do they do? Why do they need all this information?' So, there's a level of mistrust, which I fully understand.

THEME 3: Administrative delays & bureaucratic barriers

If you know anything about Jordan's Principle, it's not a low barrier service. There's a lot of documentation and paperwork. It can take very long to actually get reimbursed, and that has turned a lot of private providers off of accepting Jordan's Principle because it can take long, which is unfortunate.

SOLUTIONS

THEME 1: Capacity building & workforce development

There needs to be an increase in educational infrastructure in the North that is facilitated through partnerships with colleges and universities in the South and being able to share that expertise. Even looking at how can we train people who are closer and members of the community to be able to go in versus having individuals from Toronto come.

THEME 2: Building relationships

I think responsiveness to their situation so listening to what some of the barriers to accessing services may be. For example, I have a young child at home and being able to come up with solutions for that—that goes a long way. I think building that trust and also just making it easier logistically.

THEME 3: Awareness & outreach

If you look at how ABA and autism is presented generally, it's a very Western view so very psychopathology, you know? We need to acknowledge more traditional, Indigenous values and also, really coming from a strengths-based approach. Also removing a lot of the technical terms and making it quite a bit more straightforward.

DISCUSSION

Collectively these findings shed light on various barriers and challenges service providers encounter when supporting Indigenous families and highlight potential strategies for promoting equity in service provision.

