Severe speech and language difficulties in school aged children from language unit and mainstream settings: A qualitative study of parental experiences

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Experimental Question

What are the experiences of parents of children with severe speech and language disorder?

Methods

• Parent perspectives investigated using a qualitative research design.
• Conducted semi-structured interviews covering: first indication of difficulty, early intervention, diagnosis, school setting, and experience of school setting and support.
• Parents of 16 children participated. Seven children attended a language unit (mean age 7:03), seven children attended mainstream education (mean age 7:04), and two older children were in their final years of high school. Parents came from wide range of educational backgrounds.
• Children had a range of CELF expressive and receptive language and intelligibility scores, as shown in the figures.
• Interview transcriptions were analyzed using NVivo 2.0 software. All transcriptions were examined for content and subcategories and coded by the researchers, prior to further thematic analysis.
• Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns or themes within the data.

Themes Identified

(1) seeking support during preschool years
(2) finding a best fit
(3) concern for the future
(4) dis/satisfaction with school
(5) access to support
(6) relationships
(7) finding a perfect world

Conclusions

• All parents had some form of early intervention; this included a range of professionals involved in diagnosis or therapy. This suggests that parents understand the importance of input at this stage.
• No clear relationship was evident between the child's abilities and setting chosen. Mainstream was chosen based on location, first impressions, support offered and beliefs about the inclusion model. Language Unit was chosen based on recommendations from professionals and parents' opposition to mainstream education for their child.
• Most parents were unable to comment on their child's future as they were focused on the present. Those that did, felt there were limited or no options as their child progressed through school.
• All parents had positive experiences. There were more negative experiences, however, when parents were speaking about mainstream; these included lack of knowledge and negative attitudes of the school and staff.
• Many felt they were the sole advocate for their child when trying to access or increase services. There was some concern about the frequency of therapy, particularly as children got older.
• Parents felt that there were negative emotional, social and financial impacts on family relationships. However, they also reported positive effects on siblings and relationships with some professionals.
• Parents' descriptions of the ideal setting were varied. These included small class size, knowledgeable staff, visual supports, one-on-one, and repetition.

Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns or themes within the data.

A qualitative study of parental experiences

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