

Parents in relationships with their children with autism: A qualitative study

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Research suggests that the social and communication deficits associated with autism make it difficult for affected individuals to participate in relationships. In light of this research, I sought to explore how parents perceive and experience their relationships with their children with autism. Specifically, I sought to understand parent perceptions of how they create and sustain relationships with their affected children, and how those relationships grow and change over time.

This research was guided by developmental theories that suggest human development occurs through social interaction. Using this perspective as a conceptual framework, I conducted in-depth interviews with 34 individuals, including 24 mothers, 9 fathers and 1 grandmother. I analyzed the data using interpretative, phenomenological methods. The preliminary findings were critically reviewed by participants to increase the validity of the analysis.

Five themes emerged from this study: 1) parent perceptions of early bonding and attachment ranged from "highly unusual" to "unremarkable and normal"; 2) an overwhelming majority of parents described their relationships as non-reciprocal; 3) a large majority of parents identified significant barriers to creating relationships with their children; 4) parent strategies for creating connections with their children ranged from very limited to successful and well-established; and 5) an overwhelming majority of parents described their relationships as "growing and changing" over time, although they recognized they would remain their children's caretaker. From a synthesis of these themes, an overall finding emerged that a majority of parents in this study described having relationships that were close and satisfying, despite the numerous challenges of having a child with autism.

Findings from this study can be used to support families affected by autism and to enrich the education of professionals who work with them. It may also serve as a guide to explore how relationship development between parents and their children with disabilities differs from relationship development between parents and their typically developing children.