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**Consultation with parents of preschool children with special
needs**

O'Sullivan, Joan Anne, Psy.D.

Pace University, 1991

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

CONSULTATION WITH PARENTS OF PRESCHOOL
CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

by
JOAN A. O'SULLIVAN

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University

NEW YORK

1991



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FINAL APPROVAL FORM

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions, preferences and goals of parents of preschool children with disabilities regarding psychological consultation. Two survey questionnaires which were developed for prior studies are utilized to probe the research questions: 1) What are parents priorities for consultation services?, 2) What do parents hope to gain from consultation? and, 3) What model of consultation do parents prefer? A demographic information sheet was included. Each questionnaire was examined for specific information that indicated the source of parental concerns, i.e., Assessment Information, Behavioral Concerns, Home/Family Issues, and School Problems. Results indicate that behavioral concerns are the primary reason that parents seek consultation. Additionally, 57% of the 70 respondents identified a lack of confidence in their own ability to cope with the identified problem situation as the motivation for seeking consultation. The survey indicated that almost half of those polled prefer a collaborative/behavioral model of consultation. This study addresses the implications for service delivery for special education preschool consultation as well as the preferred models of consultation.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates basic consultation service delivery issues that are developing as schools organize to meet federal legislative challenges of the 1990's. In the last three decades, the education community has witnessed the gradual but profound influence of federal legislation on school policy throughout the states. Governmental mandates inevitably bring evolutionary changes to social structures when new laws are implemented.

Historically, social legislation has always had a powerful impact on the education community. An example of this is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (PL 89-10) which focused on economically disadvantaged students in an effort to assure equal access to educational opportunities. The landmark Education for All Handicapped Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) mandated specific services, resources and opportunities to enhance the individual education of all students with disabilities. Legislation has had an enormous impact on every aspect of American education. Governmental mandates continue to broaden their sphere

of influence to include early childhood programs through the passage of Public Law 99-457 (Education for Handicapped Amendments of 1986) which encourages early intervention programs for at-risk infants and toddlers.

Part B of PL 99-457 creates a new mandate for school districts to provide services for all 3, 4 and 5-year-olds who are at risk for developmental delay or for those who require early intervention. Implementation of PL 99-457 presents a major shift in emphasis from that of PL 94-142 where the individual child received direct service in the form of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In PL 99-457, the emphasis is on family focused intervention services where the family receives service in the form of an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). The plan was designed to address the concept that the youngster is an integral part of his/her family system. Part H of PL 99-457 emphasizes the central role of parents as teachers and advocates for their children. The legislation requires multidisciplinary cooperation and suggests active participation on the part of parents to meet the needs of the young child. The primary source of influence on the child's development is the family environment.

The law clearly identifies the family as the recipient of services rather than the individual child in isolation from his/her environment. This new emphasis on family involvement is consistent with many studies (Bailey & Simeonsson, 1988; Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990), which support the importance of: a) seeing the child in the context of his/her family, b) involving parents in the decision making process, and, c) establishing procedures for consulting with people involved in educating children with disabilities. The term "consultation" in this study refers to developing parent-professional relationships that will enable parents to articulate and achieve goals for their children.

RELEVANCE TO EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

As schools begin to implement PL 99-457, many issues arise. The law is not explicit regarding what family focus really means and how services should be delivered. Studies exploring the changing roles of parents and school personnel at the preschool level are necessary in order to provide a broader, heuristic view of preschool service delivery. The model that may offer a unifying perspective on early childhood as well as a much needed theoretical framework for early childhood education is

Bronfenbrenner's (1975) ecological theory.

The application of an ecological approach to early childhood intervention is an emerging concept. It involves re-evaluating the services provided by the local educational agency, the training of personnel to provide extended services, and the creation of an interdisciplinary team whose mandate is to empower parents or adult caretakers of preschool children with special needs (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986).

Building a partnership with parents involves recognizing family strengths, needs, and competencies. Collaboration between parents and professionals require mutual goal setting, parity, and shared participation in early intervention programs (Bailey, Rouse, Turnbull & Winton 1990). These concepts form the foundation of meaningful and productive home-school relationships. The problem of service delivery becomes the responsibility of the interdisciplinary team of which the parent and the school psychologist are integral partners. Unless educational agencies provide coordinated and collaborative service plans for children with special needs the system will never work.

This mandate poses a special challenge to the school

psychologist because it involves responsibilities of child and family assessment as well as family consultation, interagency coordination, and integrated early intervention services. As state and local educational agencies begin to comply with the mandates inherent in PL 99-457, there will be an increasing need for reliable and valid procedures that can be used to assess compliance with the family focused intervention aspects of the law. Although there is strong evidence in support of family focused services, the process by which services are to be determined is unclear. An investigation of parents' perceptions concerning psychological consultation could provide valuable insight into parental priorities and the models of consultation which would best meet their needs.

FAMILY FOCUSED INTERVENTION

The decade of the 1990's will focus on a philosophy of care that recognizes the family as the primary influence in the development of program and services for preschool children with special needs. Of necessity, early intervention programs extend the role of the school psychologist. As in the past, the school psychologist continues to provide direct psycho-educational assessment

and traditional consultation service (Alpert & Trachtman, 1980). However, in the context of recent mandates, the psychologist must also provide indirect service in the form of consultation with the interdisciplinary team as well as families of preschoolers with special needs.

The new role requires additional consultation skill and an understanding of family systems. There are also conceptual changes in how and why professionals communicate with families. Psychological consultation is the focal point of family/child/school planning because this service has the potential to address the issues that are most important to the primary care provider, the parent (Peterson & Cooper, 1989). In order to meet these challenges, it is essential that the school psychologist explore the parents' perspective in terms of the needs and priorities involved in psychological consultation. Furthermore, it is important to investigate the model of service delivery that parents feel will most effectively meet their special needs.

CONSULTATION IN THE SCHOOLS

Recent revitalization of interest on the topic of consultation as a means of providing educational services to disabled and other special learners has been

phenomenal. The literature is replete with research data that point out the similarities, differences and general definitions of consultation (Friend, 1987; Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom & Stecker, 1990; West & Idol 1981).

Factors that appear to determine the changing roles of parent and professionals in the consultative mode are the facts that: a) effective functioning of the interdisciplinary team depends on advanced consulting skills, b) an ecological approach to early childhood intervention is essential to provide effective, economical service to families as well as children, and c) implementation of an indirect service delivery model is ultimately the most helpful model in terms of shared experience and parental empowerment. It is important therefore, that the school psychologist be aware of the availability of alternative school consultation models as well as a clear understanding of the different theoretical basis for those models.

Within the school setting, Zins and Curtis (1981) identified the indirect service delivery approach as the "single most definitive aspect of the consultative approach to school based consultation", (p.79). For the purpose of this paper, three models proposed in the

research of Zins and Curtis (1981), medical, behavioral and mental health, present the most clearly differentiated models of consultation and, at the same time, demonstrate the core characteristics of effective intervention.

As state and local educational agencies begin to comply with the mandates inherent in PL 99-457, there will be an increasing need for reliable and valid procedures that can be used to assess compliance with the family focused intervention aspects of the law. Although there is strong evidence in support of family focused services, the process by which services are to be determined is unclear. An investigation of parents' perceptions concerning psychological consultation could provide valuable insight into parental priorities and the models of consultation which would best meet their needs.

RATIONAL FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the present research was threefold. First, it was designed to add to the existing body of research on parents' perceptions of the consultation process. The focus is specifically on parents of preschool children with special needs. Second, the research was developed to survey parents' concerns and/or

study was formulated to answer specific questions about parents' goals of consultation, preferred model of consultation, and how these factors interface with one another with regard to parental age, gender, and occupational status.

The design of this study was founded on three essential components. The first component deals with the respondent's primary concern or problem area regarding their preschooler. An open ended question eliciting a statement of concern was presented. These responses establish the cornerstone of the project, that is parents' expressed reason for seeking psychological consultation. The second component in the construction of this research project focused on the expectations the parent have for the outcome or goal of consultation. Closed questions were posed to which the respondent identified and ranked (i.e. first, second, and third) hoped for gains from the consultation process. These gains or goals of consultation were based on Caplan's (1970) classic research in consultee-centered consultation. Finally, the third major component was the Consultation Preference Instrument which was based on the study completed by Zins and Curtis (1981). This

questionnaire asked the respondent to rank their preferred model of consultation. A graphic representation of the interaction among variables can be seen in Figure 1. This dynamic model provides a conceptual framework for the study.

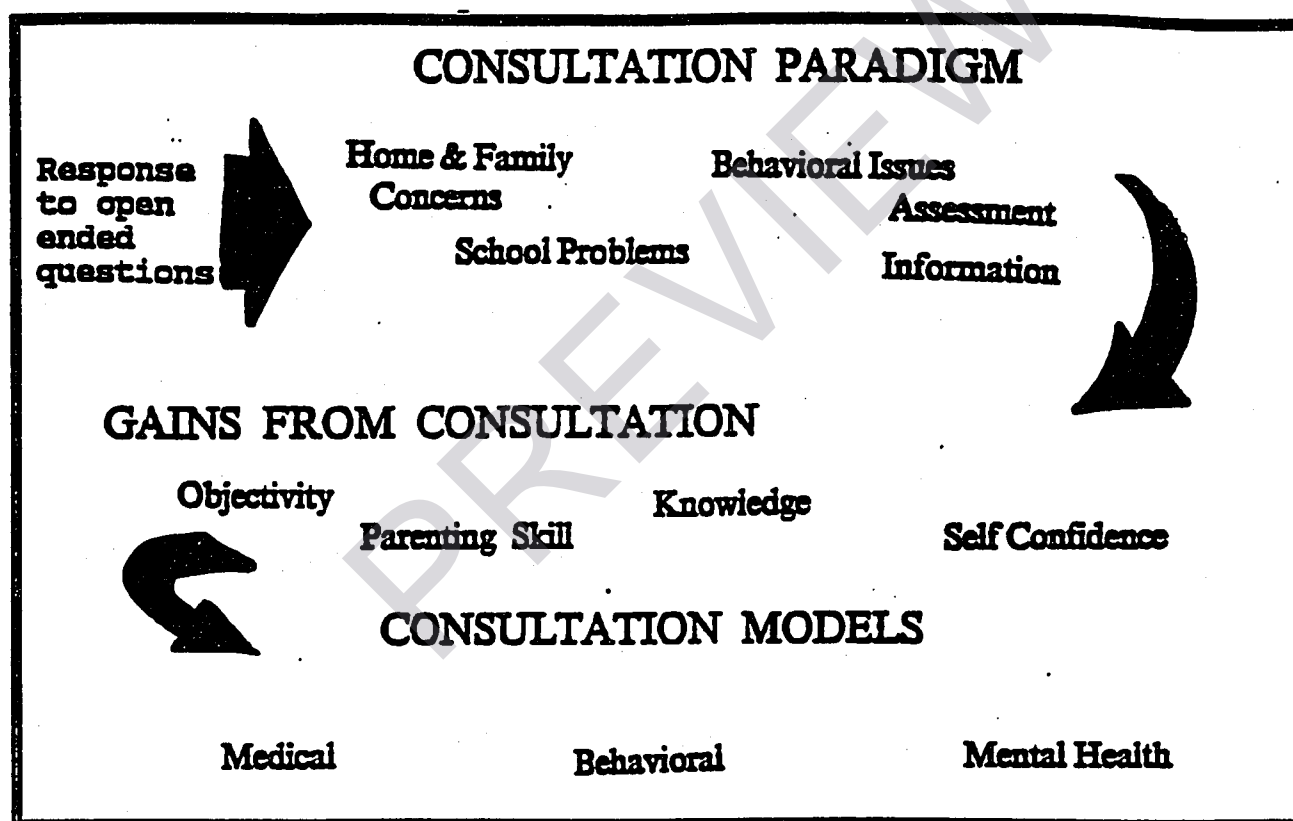


Figure 1 Consultation Paradigm

Amid the flurry of activity in response to the new legislation, research has left many unanswered questions about how parents view engagement in consultation with the school psychologist. For example, little has been written about how psychoeducational intervention is delivered to the 3 to 5 year-old preschool child with special needs. In addition, there is a dearth of information about the relationship between the problem parents identify as their primary concern and the availability of school resources needed to cope with the problem. Until recently, early childhood intervention services attempted to train the parent to be the teacher (Turnbull & Turnbull 1986). With the current emphasis on collaboration, the intervention specialist must shift emphasis and develop alternative models of service delivery that meet the needs and expectations of parents.

This study identifies parental needs and preferences that enable the school psychologist to gain insight into parents' perception of psychological consultation. The study attempts to explore models of consultation that best fit the expressed needs of parents. The following research questions were developed to clarify the issues and perceived priorities of parents

with preschoolers requiring special education.

- a) What are parents' priorities for consultation services?
- b) What do parents hope to gain from consultation?
- c) What consultation model do parents prefer?
- d) What population characteristics covary with responses to the three previous questions?

Prior Research

The most relevant prior research related to the present study can be traced to the work of Zins and Curtis (1981), Mowder, Widerstrom, and Willis, (1986) and Widerstrom, Mowder, and Willis, (1989). These researchers investigated the perceived needs of special educators and school psychologists with regard to consultation model preference. The research study by Mowder et al. (1986) provided the conceptual framework and instrumentation for the current study. Results of their studies suggest that preschool special educators are primarily concerned about behavioral issues and preferred a behavioral model of consultation to address those issues. School psychologists, on the other hand, perceive assessment issues as the most relevant to preschool children with special needs and prefer a