

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 051

EC 300 044

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 TITLE The Educational Needs of Parents of Handicapped Students.
 PUB DATE 88
 NOTE 24p.
 PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Child Rearing; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Individualized Education Programs; *Needs Assessment; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Education; State Surveys; Workshops
 IDENTIFIERS *Georgia

ABSTRACT

A Georgia survey during the 1988 Individualized Education Program (IEP) review process examined the educational needs of parents of handicapped children. Returned surveys (N=990) indicated parents felt needs for help with the following: motivating children; having children take responsibility; and developing learning activities to support school work. Items specifically related to special education (e.g., developing IEPs) were seldom selected as an area of training need. Eleven percent of the parents indicated that they had attended a workshop for parents within the past 12 months, and 81% of these parents indicated that the workshop was excellent or good. Tables detail survey findings. (24 references) (DB)

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The Educational Needs of
Parents of Handicapped Students

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Abstract

The educational needs of parents of handicapped children were surveyed during the 1988 IEP review. A total of 990 surveys were returned--approximately one percent of Georgia's families of handicapped students. The most frequently chosen items dealt with motivating children, having children take responsibility, and developing learning activities to support school work. Items specifically related to special education, e.g., developing IEPs, were seldom selected as an area of training need. Eleven percent of the parents indicated that they had attended a workshop for parents within the past twelve months, and 81% of these parents indicated that the workshop was excellent or good.

The Educational Needs of
Parents of Handicapped Students

Introduction

Parent education programs are certainly not new to special education (e.g., Karnes, Teska, Hodgins, & Badger, 1970; Shearer & Shearer, 1972; Williams, Omizo, & Abrams, 1984). However, the passage of PL 94-142 (Federal Register, August 23, 1977) which mandates the rights of parents to participate in the development of IEPs for their handicapped children has stimulated new efforts at promoting cooperation between schools and parents (Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981; Lynch & Stein, 1982; McAfee & Vergason, 1979; Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wheat, 1982; Winton, 1986). Parent education programs are a natural extension of the cooperation which has developed since PL 94-142 was passed. The purpose of the following survey was to solicit input from parents regarding their perceived need for training.

Method

During the Spring of 1988, the State Advisory Panel for Special Education of the Georgia Department of Education authorized a survey to assess the training

needs of parents of handicapped students. More than 3,000 Parent Needs Surveys were distributed to a sample of parents of handicapped students during the annual spring IEP meeting. They were asked to mark those items which indicated areas in which they felt a need for education. The sample was to reflect the geographic regions and prevalence rates of handicapped students in Georgia.

A total of 990 surveys was returned, approximately a 30% return rate, representing nearly 1 percent of the families of the 108,802 handicapped students in Georgia. When the number of returned surveys in each category of exceptionality was tested to determine whether the sample was similar to the proportion of students served in the various categories of exceptionalities in Georgia schools, the resulting test (chi square = 167.333; $p < .0001$) indicated that the sample was significantly different from the actual proportions of students served. The sample contained relatively more parents whose children were classified as moderately, severely, or profoundly mentally handicapped and relatively fewer parents of students

with behavior disorders and speech/language problems.

The Parent Needs Assessment Survey, developed by the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) of the State Advisory Panel for Special Education, was divided into 16 items dealing with general areas of parents' training needs, as well as seven items relating to the management of their handicapped child(ren)--see Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Additional items asked the parents to select which type of training delivery they preferred, to evaluate incentives for training, whether the parents had participated in a parent education workshop within the previous 12 months, and to evaluate the workshop(s).

Results

Table 1 presents the rank order in which items were most frequently selected as training need areas by at least 25% of one of the parent groups, as well as the percentage of parents in each handicapping category who selected the item. The five items which each category of parent selected most frequently are underlined.

Insert Table 1 about here

The first two items in Table 1, "Motivating Your Child" and "Having Your Child Take More Responsibility", deal with the parents' desire for training in strategies for managing the behavior of their handicapped children. These items were selected by more than fifty percent of the total parent group and were among the five most frequent choices of most parent categories.

The next five most frequently selected items requested training in helping parents to develop or provide activities for their children. Parents indicated that they wanted training in "Developing Learning Activities to Support School Work" (49% of the total), with at least 40 percent of the parents in all groups but one selecting this item. "Developing Activities to Encourage Social Growth" (46%) was one of the five most frequently selected items by all groups except parents of the profoundly mentally handicapped and other health impaired. "Finding Help for Your Child in the School and Community" was selected by only 36% of the parents, with parents of behaviorally disordered

(50%) and visually impaired students (59%) especially interested in this item. "Finding Leisure-Time Activities for Your Child" was chosen by 35% of the parents, although more than fifty percent of the parents of moderately mentally handicapped students (57%), severely mentally handicapped students (61%), and visually impaired students (65%) selected this item. "Planning for Your Child's Financial Future" was selected by 33 percent of the parents, with parents of orthopedically handicapped (53%) and visually impaired (65%) students most frequently expressed a need. Two management items on Table 1 reveals similar response patterns: "Disciplining Your Child" (the eighth most frequently selected item--32% response rate) and "Having Your Child Obey" (the thirteenth most frequently chosen item--26%) were among the top five choices of parents of severely mentally handicapped and behaviorally disordered students. Another management item was "Living With Your Teen-ager" (the eleventh most frequently chosen item--28%). This response rate is of interest in light of the fact that only 18% of the parents indicated that their exceptional child was in grades 9 through 12--the grades of most adolescents. It

is most likely that nearly one-hundred percent of the parents of adolescents marked this item.

Items directly related to special education classes were somewhat less likely than other items to be selected: "Understanding Test Results Used for Placement" (the tenth most frequently chosen item--31%), "Understanding Special Education Procedures and Due Process" (the twelveth most frequently chosen item--25%), and "Developing IEPs and other Educational Plans" (the eighteenth most frequently selected--22%).

Most of the remaining items were characterized by a relatively low frequency of selection by most parents, although respondents from certain parent groups expressed a need for help in each item. For example, only 23% of the parents selected "Developing Play Activities and Materials", although parents of severely mentally handicapped (55%), profoundly mentally handicapped (50%), and visually handicapped students (47%) selected this item more than twice as frequently as the group average. The group mean for selecting "Designing and Selecting Special Equipment, Technology, and Toys" was only 19 percent, but at least half of the

parents of profoundly mentally handicapped (50%), orthopedically handicapped (57%), and visually impaired students (53%) chose this item. The item with the lowest overall averages was "Toilet Training", although 45 % of the parents of severely mentally handicapped and profoundly mentally handicapped children selected toilet training.

Only 112 parents, (11% of the sample) indicated that they had attended a parent education workshop within the previous 12 months and 81% of those parents rated the workshop(s) as good or excellent. Proportionally more parents of visually impaired students (5 of 17--29%) and of students with specific learning disabilities (30 of 164--18%) reported attending workshops, while less than ten percent of parents of students with behavior disorders and students with speech/language impairments indicated that they had attended a parent education workshop.

Discussion

The most obvious finding of this survey is the low level of participation in parent workshops (11% in the previous year) by these respondents. The limited participation in workshops is especially striking when

considering that these respondents probably represent the parents most active in their child's education because they had attended the IEP review.

In general, the items selected by these parents of handicapped students appear to be concerns of a generic nature about effectively parenting their children rather than concerns about parenting a handicapped child. For example, concerns about motivating a child, having a child take more responsibility, and developing learning activities to support the school are not limited to the parents of handicapped children (these items were the second, third, and seventh choices of 159 parents of gifted students who responded to these items, Georgia Department of Education, 1988).

Parents in this survey most often requested training related to helping them take responsibility for working with their child, rather than related to having the school serve their exceptional child in a particular way. For example, the most frequently requested general item was the need for training in developing learning activities to support school work. Requesting help in supporting the school's programs places the parents in a

proactive role of cooperating with schools. This type of partnership is consistent with the results of other surveys. For example, several studies (Lynch & Stein, 1982; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982; Rosenberg, Harris, & Reifler, 1988) found that most parents of students with handicaps indicated that they could work successfully with teachers in accomplishing the goals and objectives of the IEP and Vaughn, Bos, Harill, & Lasky (1988) found that 39% of the parents of young LD students indicated that they felt that the primary goal of their child's school for them was to help their child with homework. Parents in the survey also reflected a proactive role in identifying their training needs on other general items. Other top choices focused on an extension of the student's development beyond school, e.g., items dealing with a need for training to help with social development, leisure-time activities, and financial planning.

Management items seemed to reflect a desire for the handicapped child to be more independent rather than reliant upon direct parental control. For example, parents requested help with motivating their child and having the child take more responsibility much more

often than for help with disciplining the child, having the child obey, and establishing rules.

Those items which directly related to the schools' services for handicapped students were typically in the lower half of the selections, i.e., understanding due process, IEPs, communication with the teacher, and resolving differences. "Understanding Test Results used for Placement" was the one school-related item which was selected by at least 30 percent of the parents. Items which were more directly related to working with handicapped students were either seldom selected by parents or only selected by particular groups of parents (e.g., "Counseling for Your Child and Family" selected by parents of students of behavior disorders and visual impairment or "Designing and Selecting Special Equipment, Technology, and Toys" selected by parents of profoundly mentally handicapped, orthopedically handicapped, and visually impaired students).

Implementation Concerns

With only 11% of these parents indicating that they had participated in a parent-training program during the previous year (the figure is probably much lower for parents who did not choose to be involved in the IEP

review), an important first step in providing training programs for parents of handicapped students is to increase parents' level of involvement with their child's school program. Increased parental involvement, however, is not an easy goal to reach in light of the characteristics of many families of handicapped students. There are clear indications that the families of handicapped students are more likely to be poor and to have single parents than the families of non-handicapped students (Singer & Butler, 1987). The well-documented stresses of being the parent of a handicapped child (Gallagher, Beckman, & Cross, 1983), along with the accompanying problems of being poor and a single parent, all suggest that getting parents involved in the schools, and in particular in a parent-training program, requires providing a great deal of support and understanding by those who seek to work with the parents.

One way of promoting parental involvement is to use the results of this survey as the first step in developing a "individualized family plan" (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1982). This plan would include an assessment of family needs for support, information, and training

(Winton, 1986). The development of such a plan would begin with the outline of general need areas for the various areas of handicapping conditions as described above and then interviewing parents as to how best to meet their specific needs.

The results of this survey also strongly suggest that the typical school-related topics of parent education that have been offered for parents of handicapped students (i.e., IEPs and due process) are not the topics most of these parents requested. Rather, these parents indicated a need for help in many areas which have both home and school implications, e.g., motivating the child, having the child take more responsibility and promoting social growth, or items which have no relationship to schooling, e.g., finding leisure-time activities and planning the child's financial future.

This project was sponsored by the State Advisory Panel for Special Education, Georgia Department of

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Figure 1.

Parent Needs Assessment Items

- Resolving differences with your child's school.
- Understanding test results used for placement.
- Understanding special education procedures and due process.
- Finding help for your child in school and community.
- Counseling for your child and family.
- Developing play activities and materials.
- Developing learning activities to support school work.
- Communicating with your child's teacher and school.
- Developing activities to encourage social growth.
- Developing IEP's and other educational plans.
- Finding leisure-time activities for your child.
- Developing plans for your child's transition to work.
- Planning for your child's financial future.
- Understanding the use of medication.
- Using microcomputers with your exceptional child.
- Designing and selecting special equipment, technology, and toys.
- Toilet training.
- Having your child obey.
- Disciplining your child.
- Motivating your child.
- Establishing rules.
- Having child take responsibility.
- Living with your teenager.

Table 1

Percentage by Handicapping Category of Parents Selecting Training Items

	Exceptionalities*											
	TOTAL	MI	MO	SMR	PMR	SLD	BD	HI	VI	SI	OH	OHI
Number Responding	990	179	99	33	22	264	104	46	17	151	30	17
Items												
Motiv. Child	<u>52%</u>	<u>44%</u>	<u>53%</u>	<u>64%</u>	<u>59%</u>	<u>54%</u>	<u>65%</u>	35%	<u>65%</u>	<u>48%</u>	43%	<u>71%</u>
Take Respon.	<u>51</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>54</u>	42	14	<u>55</u>	<u>74</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>65</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>59</u>
Act. Sppt. Sch.	<u>49</u>	<u>47</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>64</u>	36	<u>50</u>	50	<u>48</u>	41	<u>53</u>	47	<u>47</u>
Social Growth	<u>46</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>52</u>	18	<u>41</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>71</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>53</u>	35
Help in Sch./Comm.	<u>36</u>	38	35	45	<u>50</u>	37	50	32	59	21	43	<u>47</u>
Leisure-time	35	36	<u>57</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>45</u>	23	36	33	<u>65</u>	24	<u>50</u>	<u>47</u>
Financial Future	34	34	44	45	36	33	34	<u>43</u>	<u>65</u>	15	<u>53</u>	35
Disciplining	32	30	43	<u>52</u>	27	23	<u>59</u>	22	29	23	27	18
Transition	32	<u>44</u>	36	39	14	36	41	30	41	9	30	24
Test Results	31	32	33	24	18	<u>38</u>	28	24	47	26	36	29
Teen-agers	28	30	28	24	5	36	28	<u>38</u>	41	13	27	24
Due process	28	36	22	33	23	33	25	26	35	17	33	29
Child Obey	26	19	28	<u>52</u>	23	19	<u>60</u>	22	29	19	23	18
Play Act./Mater.	26	17	40	<u>55</u>	<u>50</u>	19	21	17	47	<u>30</u>	30	24
Microcomputers	25	24	31	39	14	27	21	30	29	17	33	35
Estab. Rules	23	22	22	30	18	18	42	17	35	17	30	24

(table continues)

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Exceptionalities*

	TOTAL	MI	MO	SMR	PMR	SLD	BD	HI	VI	SI	OH	OHI
Counseling	23	18	24	21	14	24	42	24	41	9	27	29
IEPs	22	24	24	24	14	24	21	20	35	17	20	24
Equip./Technol.	20	12	29	42	<u>50</u>	14	14	30	53	13	<u>57</u>	24
Communic.	19	17	11	15	9	24	25	22	29	19	10	18
Toilet Tr.	6	3	12	45	<u>45</u>	1	4	2	17	2	10	0

Five most frequently selected items by each parent category are underlined.

The following abbreviations are used for the exceptionalities:

MI: Mildly Mentally Retarded; MO: Moderately Mentally Retarded; (SMR) Severely Mentally Retarded; (PMH) Profoundly Mentally Retarded; (SLD) Specific Learning Disabilities; (BD) Behavior Disorders; (HI) Hearing Impaired; (VI) Visually Impaired (SI) Speech and Language; (OH) Orthopedically Handicapped; (OHI) Other Health Impaired