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Assessing the Current State and Potential Needs of the Community for Autism Spectrum Awareness in the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

- Number of children with autism and related disorders has been growing in Vermont in the last ten years.
- Puppets in Education, Inc (PiE) recently added a new program, Friend 2 Friend Programs-Vermont (F2F), that will work with grades K-8 to educate students and teachers about autism spectrum disorders (ASD).
- Goal is to promote understanding, acceptance, empathy and mutual friendships between children with ASD or other social communication disorders and their peers, siblings and classmates.
- Students from the University of Vermont College of Medicine partnered with PiE to evaluate the current needs of the community, determining what information would be most useful in the F2F program.

METHODS

- Literature review was done to determine appropriate topics for inclusion in the survey.
- Three surveys were formed to assess the needs of: parents with children with ASD, parents without children with ASD, and educators. Three surveys assessed:
 - current programs or curricula involving understanding of ASD and social communication skills.
 - needs of parents and educators regarding their understanding and integration of children on the spectrum.
 - the respondents' priorities for addressing issues associated with ASD.
- Surveys were administered via telephone.
- Qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed from the survey responses.

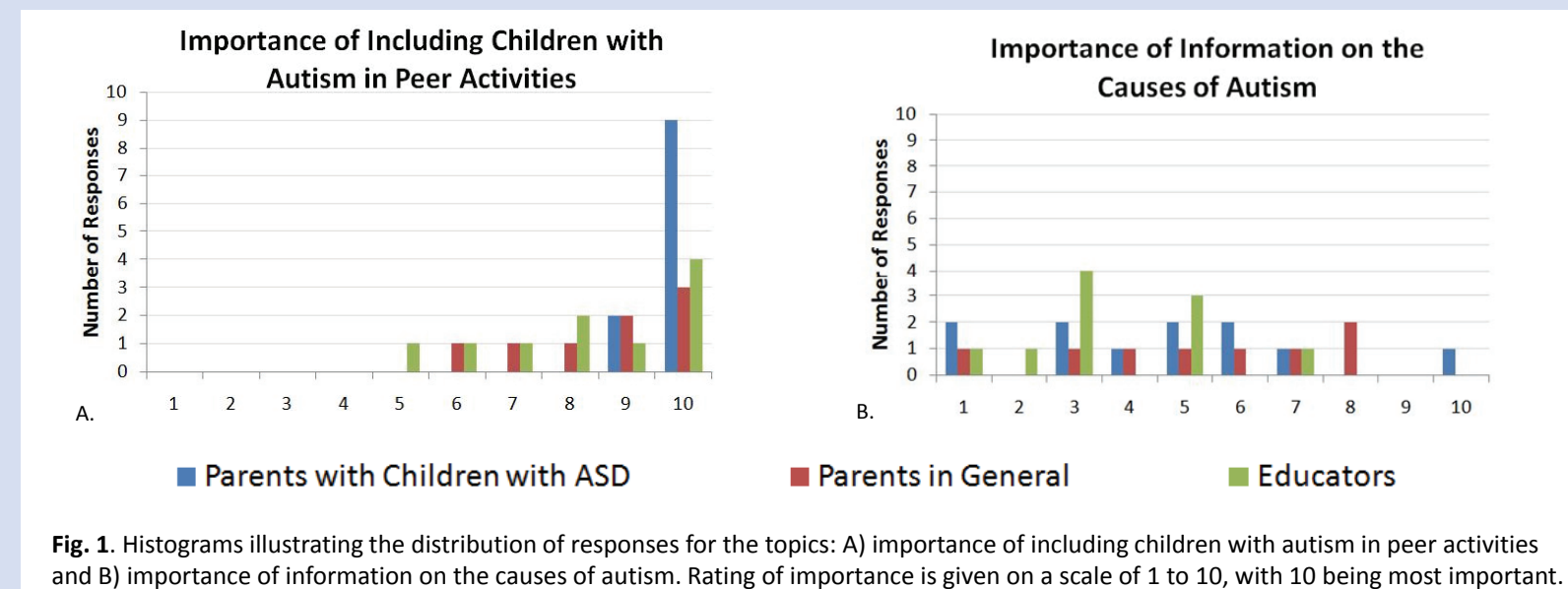


Fig. 1. Histograms illustrating the distribution of responses for the topics: A) importance of including children with autism in peer activities and B) importance of information on the causes of autism. Rating of importance is given on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being most important.

RESULTS

- Surveys were collected from 11 parents with children with ASD, 8 parents without children with ASD, and 10 educators.



Current Programs:

- Most parents and educators state their schools already have programs in effect addressing social skills development and differences/disabilities.
- Of those with programs, only 50% of all groups believe their school's current programs are effective.
- Limitations to program effectiveness included lack of diversity in Vermont, lack of inclusion of students with ASD in the classroom and lack of school- and district-wide formal curriculum.
- Most educators feel confident about balancing the needs of students with ASD with those of their peers in the classroom, though they mention a lack of training and increasing amount of coursework makes it difficult.
- "We as educators are still evolving and learning with them."

Topics to be included in an ASD educational program:

- Figure 1 shows survey results regarding two possible topics in the F2F presentation.
- How to communicate, make friends, and play with a child with ASD were in the top responses from all three groups surveyed

- Education about the possible causes of autism was the lowest in all three.
- Parents in general rated information about ASD of high importance, and educators expressed interest in learning about how students with ASD may behave differently in the classroom setting.
- "I think that students could be more effectively included with more time for collaboration and professional development on including students with disabilities – as well as time during the day devoted to social activities that facilitate this inclusion with peers..."

DISCUSSION

- Many educators and parents feel there is a current need for educational programming regarding ASD in the classroom setting.
- Most respondents believed the Friend 2 Friend Program will be an effective way to address ASD.
- Several respondents discussed inclusion of children with ASD in the classroom with their peers.
- Subject recruitment was difficult, but once enrolled they were enthusiastic about providing information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Further exploration by PiE should measure the effectiveness of the Friend 2 Friend program in addressing these topics.
- This may serve as a future area of research for the establishment of a large-scale social skills communication and inclusion program in the classroom.
- Our research group advocates for inclusion of all children in the classroom.

