

Parents training parents: Lessons learned from a study of reciprocal imitation training in young children with autism spectrum disorder

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Parent-mediated interventions (in which parents are supported to deliver an intervention to their children; as opposed to, for example, therapist-mediated interventions) are cost effective ways to increase access to appropriate services for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Our goal for this project was to make it easier for the children and families who live in rural and underserved communities to have access to autism-specific services. To do this, we started to work with parents of children with ASD who were members of rural autism identification teams in Oregon (referred to as Parent Partners). Our plan was to train these parents in an evidence based parent-mediated intervention (Reciprocal Imitation Training or RIT), and then evaluate whether these parents could effectively coach other parents of newly diagnosed children to use RIT with their child. While the enthusiasm for the project was high, we experienced several unexpected barriers which prevented us from completing the project. This led us to change the focus of our research. We decided to focus instead on interviewing the Parent Partners to help us understand what went wrong. We wanted to learn what factors would improve the success of future efforts using such an approach. The lessons we learned and recommendations for others considering this type of research are presented in the paper.