

Coaching Mothers of Children with Autism: A Qualitative Study for Occupational Therapy Practice

Lauren Foster, Winnie Dunn, & Lisa Mische Lawson

*Occupational Therapy Education, School of Health Professions, University of Kansas
Medical Center, Kansas City, Kansas, USA*

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who participated in 10 one-hour coaching sessions. Coaching occurred between an occupational therapist and mother and consisted of information sharing, action, and reflection. Researchers asked 10 mothers six open-ended questions with follow-up probes related to their experiences with coaching. Themes were identified, labeled, and categorized. Themes emerged related to relationships, analysis, reflection, mindfulness, and self-efficacy. Findings indicate that parents perceive the therapist–parent relationship, along with analysis and reflection, as core features that facilitate increased mindfulness and self-efficacy. The findings suggest that how an intervention is provided can lead to positive outcomes, including increased mindfulness and self-efficacy.

KEYWORDS. Autism, coaching, occupational therapy, qualitative study

Occupational performance coaching (OPC), or simply “coaching,” has been described in the occupational therapy literature as, “a process whereby parents are guided in solving problems related to achieving self-identified goals” (Graham, Rodger, & Ziviani, 2009, p. 16). In this approach, therapists do not “tell” parents what to do. Instead, therapists guide parents in developing strategies and supports to meet their family’s needs. Emerging evidence in occupational therapy literature supports coaching interventions as a way to increase participation of children with special needs (Dunn, Cox, Foster, Mische-Lawson, & Tanquaray, 2012; Graham, Rodger, & Ziviani, 2010). As such, coaching practices have become increasingly prevalent. Although the literature informs practitioners on how to provide coaching services and the effectiveness of coaching services (Graham et al., 2009; Rush & Shelden, 2011), little information exists about the nature of the learning experience for parents. Through a greater understanding of the mechanism of change for

Address correspondence to: Lauren Foster, Occupational Therapy Education, School of Health Professions, University of Kansas Medical Center, 3033 Robinson, Rainbow Blvd, Kansas City, Kansas 66106, USA (E-mail: lfoster@kumc.edu).

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people being coached, practices can be refined to meet the needs of parents and develop a coaching protocol that will enhance consistency among therapists. The introduction provides a brief review of the literature on family-centered practices (FCP), coaching, and qualitative inquiry.

FAMILY-CENTERED PRACTICES

Children learn and develop by participating in everyday activities (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, & Hamby, 2006; King et al., 2003). For families of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), participating in the variety of activities that comprise a family's life routines can be challenging and stressful (Schieve, Blumberg, Rice, Visser, & Boyle, 2007). Occupational therapists have a vital role in helping families choose meaningful activities that are a good match between the family's needs and resources.

Therapeutic interventions have traditionally targeted changing characteristics of the child (Rosenbaum, King, Law, King, & Evans, 1998). However, over the past three decades, this perspective has shifted from trying to "fix" a child's deficits, to FCP that promote child participation in the family's routines. Characteristics of FCP include recognizing each family's individual strengths, acknowledging caregivers as the experts regarding their child, supporting the child's learning and development by working with the family, and providing support to family members by building upon strengths, resources, and past successes (King, Teplicky, King, & Rosenbaum, 2004; McWilliam, 2010). The use of FCP is supported by the literature (Egilson, 2010; King, King, Rosenbaum, & Goffin, 1999).

COACHING

Coaching is an evidence-based practice used in FCP. The purpose of coaching is to increase knowledge, skills, and competence of a client to enable participation in the context of the family's daily life. Coaching practices have been studied in a variety of fields, including education, business, and psychology (Dunn, 2011). Evidence from these disciplines supports coaching as an effective means to increase adult learning. According to Rush and Sheldon (2011), a coach is a person who supports another person's learning through the development of collaborative partnerships, by supporting the person to achieve self-created goals, by using adult learning strategies, and by building the person's existing competencies.

A primary difference between coaching and traditional therapy services is that therapists do not *tell* the parent what to do. Instead, the therapist helps the parent problem solve challenging activities related to their child. Evidence demonstrates that supporting parental problem solving results in reduced stress, improved child participation, and a higher sense of parental competence (Dunn et al., 2012). Core elements to coaching exist; these are called elements, not steps because the process is not linear. The elements are as follows (adapted from: Rush & Sheldon, 2011):

1. **Joint Planning:** Coach and parent jointly identify what each will do between coaching sessions.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Expert-Based and Coaching Statements

Parent statement	Expert-based statement	Coaching alternative
"When he comes home, it's like he needs to run around the house."	"That's because he is a seeker. He needs to run."	"I wonder how his sensory patterns are impacting his performance? What do you think he needs when he arrives home?"
"It just takes so long to get her to go to sleep. I just don't know what to do. We've tried everything."	"Have you tried a weighted blanket?"	"You mentioned earlier that she potty trained easily. What was it about potty training that worked well? How can we use those strategies for sleep?"
"He only eats certain foods."	"Let's try incorporating only one new food a week."	"Tell me about the foods he will eat. Let's look at characteristics of those foods."

Note. Feedback Question: Coach asks parent permission to provide feedback and share information.

2. **Observation:** Coach observes the parent trying a current or new strategy. During observation, the coach may help the parent analyze the task by asking reflective questions or the coach may model a certain strategy.
3. **Action:** This is the family's "real-life" opportunity to practice/participate in occupation. Action often occurs between coaching sessions, when families engage in activities during their typical routine. In between coaching sessions, parents have the opportunity to analyze activities and try strategies within the context of their family's life. At the next coaching meeting, the parent and coach come together to discuss progress towards the goal.
4. **Reflection:** During reflection, the coach asks questions that help the parent think about what is occurring, what the parent has already tried, and what resources the parent has. After reflection, the coach can provide information related to the family's needs. The purpose of reflection is to support the parent to gain insight into current strengths and strategies (see Table 1 for examples of reflective questions).
5. **Feedback:** This is the opportunity for the coach to provide information to the parent related to interventions, development, resources, and strategies. Feedback relates to what the coach has seen and what the parent has shared. Coaches do not typically provide intervention ideas based on the coach's experience. This goes against principles of coaching. Instead, the coach invites the parent to reflect on recent experiences and develop strategies that meet the family's needs, and progressively build on the parent's insights.

Both parents and therapists bring their unique expertise to the coaching process. Parents are experts on their child, their successes, resources, and strategies. Occupational therapists are experts on occupation, child development, and evidence-based interventions for families of children with special needs.

Only one study has examined parents' perspectives of the coaching process in occupational therapy (Graham et al., 2010). Graham et al. (2010) identified themes that supported using parent-identified goals, adult learning, and therapist support. Parents reported that coaching helped them learn new skills, develop insight, and feel more empowered.

In a study by Dunn et al. (2012), therapists provided 10 coaching sessions, each lasting approximately one hour and following the core elements of coaching (Rush

& Shelden, 2011). During the coaching sessions, parents shared knowledge of the family's daily life, their child's strengths, interests, and past successes. The coach shared information on ASD, evidence-based interventions related to sensory processing, and community resources. The results indicated that coaching is an effective way to decrease parent stress, increase parent competence, and increase child participation.

Our study builds upon the research of Graham et al. (2010) and Dunn et al. (2012) by investigating the thought and behavioral processes parents experience during the coaching process. The occupational therapists who provided coaching for the Dunn et al. (2012) study observed that mothers shared similar insights related to coaching. The aim of this study was to systematically explore how mothers used their insights from the coaching process in their daily lives. Because we used Rush and Shelden's (2011) model, we anticipated finding themes related to personal reflection; we wanted to know how mothers experienced coaching and how coaching leads to change. Knowledge of the process that parents go through is important to further develop and refine practices related to the coaching.

METHODS

Participants

Ten mothers of children diagnosed with ASD aged 4–10 years (two girls, eight boys) participated in this qualitative study. All mothers were white, suburban, and had some form of college education. Of the 10 mothers, one mother had two children with ASD and her answers reflected her experience with both children. All children had or were currently receiving occupational therapy services outside of this study.

We employed a convenience sample; all mothers had just completed a larger study in which they participated in a series of 10 coaching interventions with occupational therapists (Dunn et al., 2012). Due to restrictions in time and funding, the first 10 parents (all mothers) to complete the larger study were selected to participate in the present study. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, all mothers signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the follow-up interview.

Procedures

Interviewers

At the end of the intervention phase of the Dunn et al. (2012) study, the coach interviewed the parent about his or her experiences. These interviews were used for the present study. The primary author (and a coach) conducted four interviews while the second coach conducted six. Because the larger study was ongoing at the time of this study's conception, we decided to transcribe and code the first 10 interviews from the larger study.

Interview Process

Interviewing provides an opportunity to collect data on an individual's personal experience (Merriam and Associates, 2002). In this study, coaches asked mothers a series of six open-ended questions with subsequent probing questions (e.g., "tell me more about that") aimed at understanding the mother's perception of the coaching

TABLE 2. Open-Ended Interview Questions

Number	Question	Type
1	What do you think we were trying to do?	Understanding
2	What else would you like us to know about your experience as a parent?	Understanding
3	What would you like to share with other parents about this experience?	Understanding
4	Tell me some things that you understand differently after our experience together.	Impact
5	How is what we did consistent with what you have done in the past?	Comparison
6	Tell me what you are doing differently now.	Impact

process. Questions were designed to understand how mothers understood coaching, how coaching compares to past therapy, and how coaching has affected their parenting decisions (see Table 2 for interview questions). These interviews occurred at the end of the larger study. All interviews were recorded using a Livescribe pen and transcribed verbatim by the primary author (Livescribe, Inc., 2012). Each interview occurred at the site of the mother's choice; nine occurred in the home, one occurred in a coffee shop.

Potential Biases

Developing rapport with the interviewee is important when conducting a semi-structured interview (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Building on parent-therapist rapport, the occupational therapist who worked with the parent during the larger study was the same occupational therapist who interviewed the parent for this study. Existing relationships with participants can create weaknesses and strengths for the study. One potential weakness is that mothers provided positive feedback and information on their experiences in order to please the therapist (referred to as *expectation bias*); if this is true, mothers may have been more honest and open about the study with an unrelated researcher. Conversely, the mothers may have provided more personal information because they had a relationship with the interviewer. Themes that emerged in the study were consistent between two different coaches, suggesting there is some stability in the data.

Data Analysis

To systematically uncover the experiences in the parental interviews, the primary author first transcribed all transcripts and then identified discreet chunks of data that related to the research question. Creswell (2007) refers to these categories as "meaning units." In an iterative process, the primary author identified increasingly specific conceptual categories. The primary author had periodic meetings with the other authors (a senior researcher with sensory processing expertise and a researcher with qualitative expertise) to discuss coding.

To enhance internal validity, the primary author used two types of triangulation as described by Merriam and Associates (2002). The first type was peer review, in which the primary researcher met with a team member that had no involvement in the larger study and no history of coaching to independently code a portion of the transcripts. The primary author then met with the independent reviewer to review the codes.

The second type of triangulation was member checking. After developing categories, the primary researcher contacted five of the 10 mothers by telephone to confirm the findings. Since the mothers agreed with the categories, analysis was discontinued after member checking.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results suggest that through analysis and critical reflection, mothers develop a better understanding of their child and become more mindful of their context and resources, resulting in a higher sense of self-efficacy. The following five concepts emerged and reflect how the mothers conceptualize the change process during coaching: (1) parent–coach relationship, (2) analysis, (3) reflection, (4) mindfulness, and (5) self-efficacy. The first three concepts help explain the mechanism of change during coaching and the last two are outcomes of coaching. These findings align with principles of FCP and adult learning theory.

Relationship

The relationship between coach and parent, along with specific coaching discourse (i.e., reflective questions), provides mothers an opportunity to analyze challenging occupations. Remaining an unbiased source of support is an important element to developing the coach–parent relationship and was a reoccurring theme in the transcripts. Mothers reported that the coach–parent relationship was the foundation to communicate openly, to share knowledge, reflect, and analyze activities. As stated by one mother about her four-year-old son:

I think the one-on-one though helped a little bit more than just, you know, sometimes the therapists would have an IEP goals but then you don't really sit down and talk about them for another, you know three or four months or its kind of in passing.

In the interviews, mothers often spoke about how they appreciated talking with a therapist who was objective and outside of their social/family circle. One mother stated: “I was glad to have someone who understands to go to for advice. Without any kind of . . . [sigh] . . . none of the drama when you talk to other parents.”

The therapist “advice” is specific expertise related to context, occupation, and child development. The mother’s expertise relates to her child, family, and resources. During coaching, the mother and therapist come together, each with their own set of expertise, to analyze and reflect upon the child’s occupation. These results are consistent with evidence from occupational therapy studies that suggest that knowledge sharing and therapist support leads to increased parent satisfaction and feelings of competence (Hanna & Rodger, 2002).

Themes related to adult learning were also apparent in the transcripts. According to a literature review on transformative learning (an adult learning theory), developing relationships based on mutual trust is essential to adult learning (Taylor, 2007). In fact, scholarship on transformative learning theory emphasizes that adult learning occurs through discourse and reflection (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow, who has published extensively on transformative learning, argues that learning occurs when one changes or shifts his or her frame of reference or how

one perceives a situation. The teacher (or in our case, the coach) and the learner (mother) must establish a relationship of mutual trust in order for open dialogue and critical reflection to occur. Mutual respect and trust facilitates an open dialogue between coach and mother. Establishing trusting relationships provides the context for discussion, analysis, information sharing, and understanding.

Analysis

Consistent analysis of the child's engagement in the specific occupation was also important. As one mother said, "talking about it on a weekly basis or whatever, that it made me more aware of what was going on." Or, in another mother's words:

I think analyzing with you and brainstorming what the most important elements that we need to focus on was helpful. I think you know, brainstorming how I can help [my son] with those, uh, with strategies, developing strategies . . . because I think most of the parents can identify better [with] somebody that sees them once a week for an hour, you know, what the true issues are.

Consistent with previous literature (Case-Smith & Arbesman, 2008; Graham et al., 2010; Rush & Shelden, 2011), mothers in this study identified that sharing knowledge and analyzing activities were two core factors that facilitated mindfulness and self-efficacy.

Reflection

Yet, the process goes beyond sharing information and analyzing occupations. A mother of two boys aged five and six years with ASD, compared coaching with past therapies in the following:

I feel like I was kinda coming up with my own stuff. I think it was more tailored to the child, in a way. Well, and I think the therapists do think of all the differences between the two children. But it just made me more aware of the differences and what works and why. And I understood more about why we were trying certain things. Like before, maybe the therapists would tell me, you know, "we should try this and try this." And I didn't necessarily understand why. But this time it was like, I came up with the ideas and I understood the basis for those ideas. And how we came to those ideas to try. Because I did it.

Mothers reported the importance of having the opportunity to reflect on what they tried, from one coaching session to the next. Scholars on adult learning theory argue that learning goes beyond acquiring knowledge and skills. To learn, one must understand the context and critically reflect upon one's assumptions (Mezirow, 2000).

Critical reflection is a key element to the adult learning theory as well as coaching practices. Reflection on the action or occupation, paired with task analysis, is the vehicle that helps mothers gain insight. Through reflection, the coach helps the mother perceive situations differently. One mother said that because of, "questions and the dialogue, I have a process of stepping back, analyzing and going, thinking about my own experience, ideas and [I am] more proactive than doing it the same way over and over again and getting frustrated." Furthermore, the process goes

beyond a dialogue of reflective questions. Mothers must have the opportunity to act on their assumptions and beliefs.

Mindfulness

In their study on OPC, Graham et al. (2010) discuss how coaching leads to increased learning and “greater insight” (p. 11) among mothers. Based on the interviews, we believe that the process goes beyond learning new skills and gaining insight; we use the term “mindfulness” to describe how mothers’ experiences change related to mothers descriptions of paying attention to a situation, analyzing it, and accepting the outcomes. We also use the term mindfulness because mindfulness has been described in the literature as a way to decrease stress (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004) and impact occupational participation (Dunn, 2009). For example, a mother of a 10-year-old boy talked about how she accepts the current situation with the following:

I’m seeing growth. You know, so, I’m no longer looking at whatever he’s doing as a permanent fixture. I’m looking at it as, okay, this is something that I’m gonna try to help him identify. And maybe we’ll get it right away and maybe it’ll take time but I’m not gonna assume that how he is now in this moment, is how he’s gonna interact with the world forever.

To have insight is to understand; to be mindful is to understand, accept, and act on one’s insights. For example, another mother discussed how she came to the realization that her child benefited from visual supports instead of verbal cues. She states, “if it’s that easy [visuals], why am I trying to force him to do it this way [talking to him]. He doesn’t hear it. He needs to see it.”

In this mother’s case, by re-examining her perceptions and beliefs regarding her child’s participation in the activity, the mother became more mindful of the contextual factors that influenced her child’s performance.

Self-Efficacy

The final outcome of coaching is, in one mother’s words, to “help empower mothers to figure out ways they can improve the quality of their life and their kids.” By being mindful and solving problems proactively, mothers reported an increased sense of self-efficacy. For example, one mother said the purpose of coaching was for “empowering parents and giving them the confidence so then they don’t feel helpless and hopeless and throw their hands up.” Mothers reported that approaching problems proactively, instead of out of desperation, was also important. Greater understanding of the context can lead to a greater sense of empowerment (Nachshen & Minnes, 2005). Mothers often spoke of how, when they generated their own interventions, they felt empowered. Being active problem solvers is a theme that is supported by literature on family resiliency (Bayat, 2007) and occupational therapy practice (e.g., Bedell, Cohn, & Dumas, 2005; Case-Smith & Arbesman, 2008).

An interesting observation was that when asked about the intervention, few mothers spoke about sensory processing. During the interventions, occupational therapists helped parents devise plans (using coaching) based on their child’s sensory processing needs; yet, in the interviews, few mothers discussed sensory

processing. Perhaps this indicates that mothers perceived coaching as a method for analyzing performance in context and less about learning specific sensory processing techniques. Collecting data on parent learning following a coaching intervention is a future research aim and will help to determine whether or not parents are gaining skills and knowledge along with self-efficacy.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study was designed after the researchers in the larger study collected the majority of the data. Thus, data containing researcher observations and perceptions were limited. Because all coaching sessions in the larger study were recorded, we transcribed and analyzed the data to provide clinical examples of coaching to other therapists.

Analysis and reflection are two themes that were found in the transcripts and are also consistent with the Rush and Shelden (2011) model of coaching. Two possibilities for this can be considered. Firstly, that the Rush and Shelden (2011) model influenced how we interpreted the themes from the transcripts. We used the Rush & Shelden (2011) model as the structure for providing the interventions; therefore, it is no surprise that we found themes consistent with the model in the transcripts. Secondly, it is possible that the presence of the reflection and analysis themes provides evidence that supports the Rush and Shelden (2011) model.

We had a homogenous sample; all of our participants were mothers of children with ASD. A homogenous sample allows researchers to analyze the phenomenology of a specific population. Although we cannot assume other populations (e.g., fathers, parents of child with behavioral disorders) would have similar experiences, we can use constructs found in this study as support for mindfulness and self-efficacy measures in future research. Furthermore, because coaching emphasizes parent analysis of contextual factors and targets *parents*, hence results should be similar despite the child's disability. Future research should measure the effects of coaching on parents who have children with disabilities other than ASD as well as parents of typically developing children.

Finally, we recommend that further quantitative studies use psychometric tests to examine the relationships between the constructs and the participants. For example, self-efficacy measurements should be included as an outcome measure in intervention studies that use coaching as a delivery method.

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that coaching can lead to a perceived sense of mindfulness and self-efficacy for mothers of children with ASDs. Coaching targets perceptions – or how mothers perceive and approach solving day-to-day challenges related to their child. Changing one's perception occurs through discourse, analysis, and reflection. Coaching goes beyond helping mothers solve daily problems. The process of coaching is intended to help individuals gain insight into their resources, challenges, and situation. Perhaps coaching helps parents shift their frame of reference or lens in which they perceive their child, the context surrounding the occupation, and the occupation itself.

The findings revealed that the mothers perceived coaching as a way to become more mindful of the contextual factors and routines related to their child and family's performance. Core elements related to the process align with principles of FCP and adult learning. Our findings are also consistent with results from the Graham et al. (2010) study and suggest that supporting mothers to generate their own solutions to family needs may enable mothers to gain a better understanding of their child, the impact of their daily routines and contexts, and the options for supporting their child's participation in their everyday lives.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lauren Foster, OTD, OTR/L, is Clinical Assistant Professor in Occupational Therapy Education at the University of Kansas Medical Center, School of Health Professions, Kansas, USA; **Winnie Dunn**, PhD, OTR, FAOTA, is Professor and Chair of Occupational Therapy Education at the University of Kansas Medical Center, School of Health Professions, Kansas, USA; **Lisa Mische Lawson**, PhD, CTRS, is Research Assistant Professor in Occupational Therapy Education at the University of Kansas Medical Center, School of Health Professions, Kansas, USA.

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