

Executive Summary Empowering Fathers Enhancing Play-Based Interactions for Children with Autism

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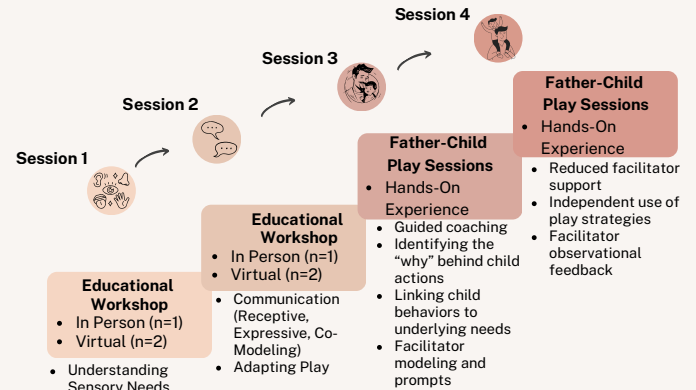
Abstract

Fathers are essential yet often underserved in autism services (Perzolli et al., 2021; Rafferty et al., 2020; Seymour et al., 2020). Active father involvement supports children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, with play serving as a key father-child co-occupation (Bloom, 2015; Memari et al., 2015; Rudelli et al., 2021). However, many fathers report lower confidence in play-based interaction (Boyd et al., 2021; Meadan et al., 2016; Potter, 2016; Rankin et al., 2019), limited access to father-specific services (Paynter et al., 2018; Rudelli et al., 2021), elevated stress and isolation (Rudelli et al., 2021), and 44% report receiving no formal training (Potter, 2016).

Brief

Fathers of children with autism play a critical role in their child's development, yet they are often underserved in autism services and report limited support in play-based interactions. This capstone addresses that gap through a strengths-based coaching program designed to improve fathers' confidence, engagement, and effectiveness in play with their children.

Figure 1
Program Implementation and Session Structure



Note. Sessions 1-2 consisted of educational workshops delivered in person or virtually. Sessions 3-4 involved father-child hands-on play sessions. Session times were coordinated to accommodate fathers' schedules.

Problem Statement

Fathers of children with autism are often underrepresented in training and targeted skill development in modifying play-based activities and ability-focused interactions to support the successful co-occupation of play, which may result in an under-utilized resource for supporting the child's developmental needs (Boyd, 2019; Meadan, 2015; Potter, 2016; Rankin, 2019)

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this *Program Development & Evaluation* entry-level OTD capstone is to:

- Address the lack of training and targeted skill development for fathers of children with ASD
- Enhance fathers' ability to modify play-based activities and implement ability-focused interaction strategies
- Promote successful father-child co-occupation of play to support the child's developmental needs

Participant's Demographic

Table 1
Father Participant Pairs Demographic Information and Clinical Characteristics (N = 3)

Characteristics	Participants Mean [SD] or N (%)
Father Sociodemographic	
Sex, male	3 (100)
Ethnicity (Family-Reported)	
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1 (33.3)
Caucasian	2 (66.7)
Child Sociodemographic	
Age, in years	5.1 [0.9]
Age Minimum, in years	4.0
Age Maximum, in years	5.7
Sex	
Female	2 (66.7)
Male	1 (33.3)
Clinical	
Diagnosis	
Autism Spectrum Disorder	3 (100)
Time since Diagnosis, range in years	1.3-3.0
Occupational Therapy Services	
Previously received OT	1 (33.3)
Currently receiving OT	2 (66.7)

Note. Abbreviations: OT= Occupational Therapy

Synthesis Project + Experience

Project:

- Create and implement a father training program focused on improving play-based interactions with children with autism.

Experience:

- Completes the capstone experience by facilitating the father program and attending OT sessions with multiple therapists at the Arc of the Ozarks.

Methods

- Develop and implement a father-focused training program in collaboration with a community-based nonprofit organization (The Arc of the Ozarks) (see **Figure 1**)
- Three father-child pairs enrolled in the program (see **Table 1**)
- Direct engagement guided program development, supported real-time application of evidence-based strategies, and informed iterative improvements

Results

Pre- and post-survey data assessed fathers' perceived confidence in supporting their child's play and developmental engagement across nine domains

- One father showed increased confidence across multiple domains from pre- to post-program (see **Figure 2**)
- Two fathers reported consistently high confidence (M = 5) at both time points, indicating no change
- Results suggest the program supported both gains in confidence and maintenance of high confidence levels.
- All three fathers reported maximum satisfaction scores following program participation (see **Figure 3**)



Child Specific Information

Father-Child Pair 1

- OT Services: August 2022–September 2024 (~13 months)
- Autism Diagnosis: 2023
- Level 1: Social communication & repetitive behaviors
- Not currently receiving OT
- Father entered the program with a lower baseline confidence

Father-Child Pair 2

- OT began September 25, 2024
- Autism Diagnosis: November 2024
- Level 3: Social communication & repetitive behaviors

Father-Child Pair 3

- OT began September 3, 2024
- Autism Diagnosis: March 2024
- Level 3: Social communication
- Level 2: Repetitive behaviors

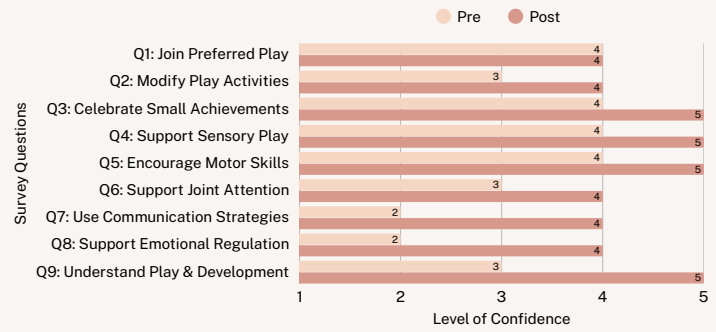
Father-Child Pair 2 & 3

- OT Services: ~18 months each; actively receiving OT services
- Both fathers reported higher baseline confidence levels

Findings suggest that fathers of children actively receiving OT services demonstrated higher baseline confidence and competence compared to those no longer engaged in services.

Figure 2

Father Participant 1 Level of Confidence Reported Pre- and Post-Program



Note. Survey questions are rated on a scale of 1-5, 1=Not Confident At All, 2= Slightly Confident, 3= Somewhat Confident, 4= Confident, 5= Very Confident

Key Findings

- Father-focused, occupation-based interventions improved co-occupation of play, increasing engagement, confidence, and participation
- Embedding skill development in meaningful play enhanced joint attention, self-regulation, and social participation more than isolated training
- Caregiver training improved family dynamics and supported generalization across environments
- Recruitment and retention challenges emphasize the need for flexible scheduling, community partnerships, and accessibility
- Future programs should use measures sensitive to short-term outcomes
- Evidence-based programs tailored to fathers' needs within trusted organizations strengthen family bonds for children with autism

Limitations

- Small sample size (n = 3)
- Short duration of intervention
- Reliance on self-report measures
- Limited objective outcome measures

Figure 3

Father Satisfaction Outcomes Following Program Participation



Note. Three fathers completed an eight-item satisfaction survey. Survey questions rated on a scale 1-5, 1= Very Dissatisfied, 2= Dissatisfied, 3= Neutral, 4= Satisfied, 5= Very Satisfied. All items were rated "very satisfied."

Clinical Bottom Line

A structured, father-focused, play-based intervention improves caregiver confidence and engagement while supporting child participation, demonstrating occupational therapy's critical role in family-centered, co-occupational intervention models in community settings.

Next Step

- Expand implementation to a larger sample size
- Incorporate objective outcome measures to enhance the validity of program outcomes
- Evaluate long-term outcomes to determine sustained effects on father engagement and child participation across daily routines

Capstone Defense Presentation

SCAN ME!



Implications for Occupational Therapy

This capstone aligns with AOTA's Vision 2030 to build diverse, equitable, and inclusive profession that maximizes participation in meaningful occupations.

- Practice:** Integrate fathers into play-based, family-centered interventions to support engagement and development
- Education:** Use strengths-based coaching to build fathers' confidence and support carryover in daily routines
- Advocacy:** Promote inclusion of fathers by addressing barriers (e.g., access, scheduling)
- Research/Leadership:** Expand evidence through larger samples, objective measures, and long-term outcomes



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