

How team dynamics shape success for children with autism in public schools

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Because of financial barriers for clinical interventions, intensive educational interventions in school settings often are the primary resource for children with autism from lower-income families.

Continuity of care in school settings can require coordination, referred to as social capital, between the "team-around-the-child" (TAC) – the parents, school staff and community providers. However, inequality in access to social capital could adversely impact the ability of the TAC to provide continuity of care for children with autism from lower-resource families during disruptive schooling transitions.

Researchers from the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute at Drexel University investigated if the TAC was associated with perceived successful transitions for children with [autism](#) from lower income families.

"We found that engaging families in problem solving, promoting trust within teams and addressing any child problem behaviors promotes successful school transitions for children with autism following the transition," said Elizabeth McGhee Hassrick, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Autism Institute, and lead author. "These findings highlight the importance of providing the TAC with support and resources to build trust to address the complex needs of children with autism during these milestones."

The study provides insight about how team dynamics shape success for children with autism from lower resourced families in public [school settings](#). And findings suggest that TAC trust is significantly associated with successful outcomes of transition for children with autism immediately following the transition.

Participants, which included key home, school and health care providers whom provided intervention support for children with autism, were recruited from participating public schools in three different states. Federal poverty levels were used to provide a standard threshold across the three states. Participants were from low resourced families, defined as having a household income that was 200% at or above the federal poverty threshold (adjusted for family size), and were experiencing a

transition to a new school during a key developmental period—either from prekindergarten to kindergarten or elementary to middle school or high school.

The research team collected and analyzed data collected during the pre-transition period (six weeks before the end of the school year) and the post-transition period (three months following the beginning of the new school year).

They investigated if two different types of TAC relationships are associated with perceived successful transitions. The two types were defined (1) as the level of trust among [team members](#) and (2) the degree of collaborative [problem solving](#) among team members.

"A smooth, well-orchestrated transition for a child with autism to a new school requires many details, big and small, that are challenging to coordinate and accomplish," said McGhee Hassrick. "Special attention should be given to the social networks and teams around the children from lower income families to ensure a successful transition into their next stage of life."

Researchers emphasized that problem behaviors negatively affect other areas of development, such as opportunities for socialization and learning. There is a need to address problem behaviors in order to ensure a smooth new school transition for children with autism.

Because [lower-income families](#) with children with autism often rely on these teams, researchers hope this study shows the importance and impact of teams and quality of social relationships on the care given for the child.

"We hope this study spurs future work which includes a longitudinal design with a robust enough sample to investigate the impact of team

characteristics on new school transition success. Using a longitudinal design would allow follow up at critical time points of the transition and may reveal areas of opportunity for caregiving among team members," added McGhee Hassrick.

According to the researchers there currently are no transition support interventions being developed that address the specific [continuity of care](#) needs of [children](#) with autism from lower resourced families.

The study, "Disrupted Care Continuity: Testing Associations between Social Networks and Transition Success for Children with Autism" was recently published in *Social Sciences*.

More information: Elizabeth McGhee Hassrick et al, Disrupted Care Continuity: Testing Associations between Social Networks and Transition Success for Children with Autism, *Social Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/socsci10070247](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10070247)

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