



Country Specific Reports

Integrative Parents' Autism Training
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1. INTRODUCTION

The IPAT training activity was delivered in Spain from 4th March to 10th June, consisting of 8 three hours-long sessions that took place on Fridays 17.00 pm-20.00 pm in Spanish language.

The average attendance to the meetings was 11 people, from 8 until 13 people, as follows:

- 1st meeting, 4th and 18th March: 15 people in total (we repeated the 1st meeting two days in order to facilitate the attendance)
- 2nd meeting, 25th March: 13 people
- 3rd meeting, 1st April: 10 people
- 4th meeting, 29th April: 11 people
- 5th meeting, 6th May: 8 people
- 6th meeting, 20th May: 8 people
- 7th meeting, 3rd June: 9 people
- 8th meeting, 10th June: 9 people

Over this period of four months, the participating parents received knowledge and guidance about key issues related to autism, including new perspectives on the understanding of autism, available support and therapeutic services for children with ASD, the role of family members in the care of children with ASD, developmental issues and sexuality, the rights of individuals with autism, among other topics directly relevant to parental needs. Participants were also able to engage in activities that enabled them to reflect on these issues, identify and acknowledge their own needs, by interacting with other parents and sharing valuable experiences and relevant information.

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The aim of the IPAT training activity was to deliver a psychoeducational programme for parents of individuals with autism and consequently design a digital self-learning tool, based on previous research and the review of literature on parental needs. Psychoeducation is a specialized form of education aimed at helping to learn and creating awareness about a range of emotional and behavioural difficulties, their effects and strategies to deal with them. Thus, the focus of psychoeducation is the provision of practical help. In this respect, the IPAT training activity was structured and delivered in a way that balances academic content and accessible, applicable, skill-building knowledge in order to bring about a positive impact on stress level and perceived quality of life.

Participants were recruited by creating an invitation poster that described in detail the requirements for participating to the IPAT training activity. The invitation was distributed to parents of children with autism through professionals and organizations associated with Autismo Burgos. Participants met two essential selection criteria: a) they had no prior experience of attending a psychoeducation training in autism and b) that they actively commit to the IPAT training activity until its completion. 15 parents were recruited and signed a confidentiality form via e-mail before the onset of the training activity. There were no constraints as to the age of the child with autism and the level of their functionality.

All IPAT sessions were delivered and coordinated by two moderators, both mental health professionals with work experience in the field of autism, who were recruited between the staff of Autismo Burgos, with a wide experience and knowledge in autism and dealing with families. The moderators participated in several online meetings with the selected moderators in the other partner countries, previous to the training sessions, where they received specific training by the project coordinator, in order to present the contents to the trainers, to solve their doubts and to unify the methodology of the interactive activities.

At the beginning, IPAT training sessions were scheduled via Meet platform. The link was sent to all participants a few days before each scheduled meeting. From session 4th onwards, the mixed format was offered, facilitating the possibility of face-to-face meetings once the pandemic restrictions were lifted, although most families continued choosing digital format.

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Each meeting followed a fixed structure, consisting of four 15' lectures, 10' for questions, 10' coffee break, 45-60' for reflection and experiential activities. Overall, the duration of each meeting was scheduled for three hours.

2. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE IPAT TRAINING ACTIVITY

Strengths

- Even though the parents did not know the moderators, a climate of trust was created from the beginning that helped to overcome the families' initial reluctance.
- Personal experiences shared by families are a powerful support tool for other families. Parents feel understood and tend to take as valid the strategies that others apply in situations similar to their own.
- Time dedicated to interactive activities, allowing families to share their experiences and concerns.
- Very broad and comprehensive training. Importance given to sexuality and intimacy, which is highly valued by both the moderators and the families, as they consider that there is not so much training on this subject. Also, giving space to talk about bullying, possibly what worries them the most.
- Feeling of support, being part of a team, between families and between families and moderators.

Weaknesses

- 3 hours of sessions, added to the fact that it was held on a Friday, made it very tiring for everyone. There are very dense topics, for example laws, the origins of the first disability laws, etc... It was difficult to engage families with these topics.
- Training materials are not available until the time of the training, which reduces preparation time for moderators, lack of time to search for resources, videos, articles...
- Some materials are too dense, not well adapted for training aimed at parents who have not received prior training

3. CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

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- The first days of training, it was difficult for parents to start talking about their concerns with people they didn't know in the final activity. However, once they started talking, several parents told us about their concerns.
- Involve all families in the discussions, and not just the usual ones.
- Solve the technical problems that occurred during the meeting, usually present at meetings held in digital form.
- Challenges related to the questionnaires: there were many parents who did not send them to us before the meeting, even though we had told them to do so.
- Stability of participation: it is very difficult to maintain a consistently high participation over 8 weeks. The unforeseen events and needs of families over such a long period force them to reduce their attendance at the training.

4. POINTS RAISED BY PARTICIPANTS AND MODERATORS OF THE IPAT TRAINING ACTIVITY

- It is the activity that parents value the most, because it allows them to exchange experiences and learn what other parents do in situations similar to their own.
- It is a valuable opportunity to reflect on everyday life.
- It is a space for relaxation within the routine of daily occupations.
- They feel listened to and understood, it is comforting to feel part of a group with whom they share needs.

5. SUGESTIONS FOR MODIFICATION

- Presentations should be delivered earlier to moderators, so they could have more time to prepare them better.
- Contents of sessions could be more concrete and clear.
- To offer parents the possibility to look at the presentations at their leisure time, so if they have any questions they can ask moderators.
- More attention to day-to-day aspects, to everyday problems, not so much theory (these were the first 2 meetings) and more "hands-on" knowledge of rights.
- Families believe that it would be better to hold the sessions every other week, as well as shorter (2 hours is fine) even if it means extending the number of meetings.
- More motivation for them to attend in person, as the 3 people who did so valued it very positively, even though they did not attend the face to face format.
- Motivate parents to attend the meetings, because there are mothers who always attend the meetings.