

Abstract

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are characterized by language impairments and are often treated with a variety of communication interventions. In addition to these interventions, the parents of autistic children have to learn how to care for and communicate with their children on a daily basis, especially when their children do not speak. Learning to communicate with an autistic child is a multi-faceted phenomenon, requiring parents to learn more about the diagnosis itself, intervention options, and what works best for their particular child. This study made use of phenomenological investigation techniques to explore (1) what parents understand about communication with their nonspeaking autistic children and (2) what particular strategies they find to be effective. Six mothers of autistic children were interviewed, and resulting themes were divided according to parents' understandings and the formal and informal strategies they use. In speaking about their understanding of communication, the participants acknowledged both internal and external factors that aided or prevented their nonspeaking children from communicating. Reflecting a similar contrast, the strategies they used could be divided into two main categories: formal strategies, such as speech-language pathology services, and informal ones, such as nonverbal exchanges. The results of this study can be applied in further study of nonspeaking autistics, who are often overlooked in autism research, as well as in increasing sensitivity for professionals working with families of children with autism.