AAC TELEPRACTICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CAREGIVER PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR ROLE IN SERVICE DELIVERY

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Introduction

- In Spring of 2020, the COVID-19 Pandemic caused a lockdown throughout the United States which required schools and clinics to stop providing in-person services (Biggs et al., 2022).
- The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the way speech-language pathologists (SLPS) and caregivers interacted and highlighted the crucial role of caregiver-service provider partnerships in providing augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) services for children (Therrien et al., 2022).
- The purpose of this study is to further examine caregivers' perspectives on their role in service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding AAC telepractice services. Identifying these caregiver perspectives can further improve the relationships between caregivers and SLPs which can have a significant positive impact on children utilizing AAC services (Barton-Hulsey, et al., 2023).
- In-order to improve services, we must gain more insight on caregiver perspectives, paired with current knowledge about SLP perspectives, to create more effective AAC services.

Research Questions

1. **What roles do caregivers believe they have in supporting their child's communication?**
2. **How do caregivers view the role of their child's SLP?**
3. **To what extent do caregivers feel their role has changed or stayed the same as a result of the pandemic?**

Current Study

This study was conducted within a larger project focused on SLPs and caregivers of children who used aided AAC and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Inductive Qualitative Methods were used which included 50 semi-structured interviews (Saldana, 2020)
Participants included 25 caregivers and 25 SLPs of children and adults between 3-21 years of age who use aided AAC. Participant can be found in Table 1.

Table 1.

Variable	n (%)
Caregiver Demographics	
Race/Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	19 (76.0)
Hispanic/Latino	3 (12.0)
Black/African American	1 (4.0)
Asian/Asian American	1 (4.0)
Gender	
Female	24 (96.0)
Male	1 (4.0)
Employment	
Parent employment status	
Employed	19 (76.0)
Stay-at-home parent	4 (16.0)
Did not respond	2 (8.0)
Child Characteristics	
School Level	
PreK	6 (24.0)
Elementary	7 (28.0)
Middle	7 (28.0)
High/Transition	5 (20.0)
Child's IDEA category	
Speech or language impairment	13 (52.0)
Intellectual disability	12 (48.0)
Autism spectrum disorder	9 (36.0)
Multiple disabilities	6 (24.0)
Orthopedic impairment	2 (8.0)
Other disabilities	1 (4.0)

Methods

Table 2.

Aim	Code	Likert Scale	Operational definition
1	Little to no role	0	Caregivers believe they have little to no role in supporting their child's communication, view the SLP as the main individual to implement strategies and expect the SLP to plan most aspects of services
	Somewhat of a role	1	Caregivers believe they have somewhat of a role in supporting their child's communication, believe SLP should teach them how to carry over strategies at home and expect SLP to plan most aspects of services with their input in mind
	Significant role	2	Caregivers believe they have a significant role in supporting their child's communication, expect to be coached by SLP, and collaborate with SLP to plan most aspects of services
2	Professionally-centered	0	Caregivers view SLPs as the experts, and had little to no desire to be involved in intervention
	Family-allied	1	Caregivers view themselves as the "arms" of the SLP and desire to be somewhat involved with intervention
	Family-Focused	2	Caregiver view SLPs as valuing their expertise on their child and desire to be highly involved in intervention
3	More involvement	0	Caregivers felt that they became more involved in supporting their child's communication through increased responsibilities such as implementing more strategies at home, being more involved in planning aspects of service, increased SLP-caregiver collaboration, etc.
	No change in involvement	1	Caregivers felt that their involvement remained the same regarding supporting their child's communication with no change to responsibilities
	Less involvement	2	Caregivers felt that they became less involved in supporting their child's communication through decreased responsibilities such as being provided less strategies to implement at home, less involvement in planning aspects of service, little or no SLP-caregiver collaboration, etc.

Qualitative Methods were used to analyze and code 25 caregiver interviews (N=25) from the larger study. Statements from caregivers that were categorized as expressing comments about the "Family-SLP partnership" were further analyzed using three Likert scales represented in Table 2.

- Quotes were first categorized by research aim. The primary researcher and research assistant independently grouped quotes by aim and came to consensus about the aim they fit in.
- Next, the primary researcher rated all excerpts according to the Likert scale in Table 2, and a second research assistant also independently rated all the excerpts for reliability.
- **Cohen's Kappa = .888 which indicates high reliability**

Results

1. **What roles do caregivers believe they have in supporting their child's communication?**
   8 quotes were identified that represented caregivers' believing they had little to no role
   11 quotes were identified that represented caregivers' believing they had somewhat of a role
   35 quotes were identified that represented caregivers' believing they had a significant role

   How do caregivers view the role of their child's SLP?
   6 quotes were identified that represented caregivers' viewing the SLP was the expert and they had little to no desire to be part of intervention
   21 quotes were identified that represented caregivers' viewing themselves as the "arms" of the SLP and had somewhat of a desire to be part of intervention
   25 quotes were identified that represented caregivers' viewing the SLP's as valuing their expertise and desiring to be highly involved in intervention
3. **To what extent do caregivers feel their role has changed or stayed the same as a result of the pandemic?**
   26 quotes were identified that represented caregivers' believing they became more involved in supporting their child's communication
   8 quotes were identified that represented caregivers' believing their role did not change in supporting their child's communication
   0 quotes were identified that represented caregivers' believing they became less involved in supporting their child's communication

P42R3: "with the private SLP, I think it's more of a collaborative effort. She talks to us about what are our goals for CHILD42, what do we want him to learn. And then she tells us this is what we worked on today, this is how you can continue that."

P32R3: "She happens to be with people that are innovative, that are motivated, that are passionate about what they do. This is all new for everyone, and I told them at the beginning, "Listen, let's be patient with each other. I don't expect you to be perfect at this. Don't expect us to be perfect at this, and let's just figure this out together."

P7R2: "Trying to be a multi- grade level special education speech therapist, all that at once it's been a full-time job more than being the stay at home mom"

Discussion

- The quantitative analysis indicates that most caregivers believe that have a significant role in supporting their child's communication and desire to be highly involved in intervention.
- Additionally, majority of caregivers felt they had more responsibilities regarding their child's intervention as a result of the pandemic.
- In terms of involvement SLPs should consider these results when developing relationships with caregivers, sending home materials and creating intervention plans.
- Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic this study showed that caregivers not only can carry out intervention methods at home when asked but often want to be more involved in their child's AAC services.
- Future intervention methods should consider caregiver perspectives so they can better include them in intervention which has shown to help children (Halgunseth, 2009; Epstein, 2000; Biggs et al., under review).
- It is important to note that the findings include participants that were majority female and lacked racial and ethnic diversity. Also, due to the COVID-19 pandemic interviews were all held virtually which prohibited individuals without access to technology from participating.
- Due to these limitations, generalization of these results to larger communities with various backgrounds is cautioned.

Future Research

- Future studies should continue to explore caregiver perspectives using a more diverse sample and promote participation by making interviews more accessible

References

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