

EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF FATHERHOOD AMONG FATHERS WITH
SONS WHO HAVE AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

A Dissertation
by
JEFFREY ALLEN ISENHOUR

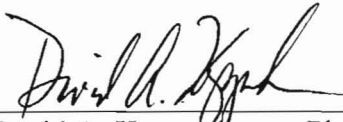
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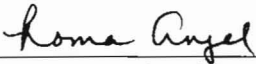
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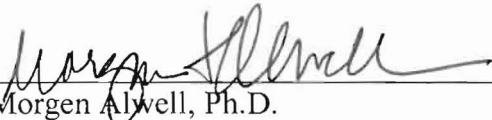
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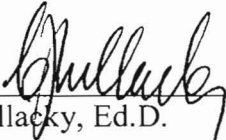
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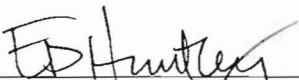
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ABSTRACT

EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF FATHERHOOD AMONG FATHERS WITH SONS WHO HAVE AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (May 2010)

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The purpose of this study was to expand on the research of Long (2005) and address the gap in the research literature related to the role of fathers of children with autism spectrum disorders, the intimate relationships fathers experience with their sons who are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders, and changes in the fathers' perceptions of fatherhood.

A qualitative, phenomenological research approach was used for this study to explore the following questions: (a) What are the experiences among fathers of sons with autism spectrum disorders? and, (b) How do fathers' perceptions of fatherhood change through the experience of parenting a son with an autism spectrum disorder? Participants were selected

using the criteria of biological fathers who have sons with autism spectrum disorders, excluding Rett syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder, and who were currently married to their sons' mothers. Six fathers of sons with autism spectrum disorders were interviewed regarding their sons' diagnoses, views on fatherhood, and changing experiences related to having a son with an autism spectrum disorder. Data collected from interview transcripts and field memos were analyzed and organized into themes. Six major themes emerged from the interview data: 1) concerns for their sons' future; 2) behavioral impacts of the son on family social life; 3) experiences with their own fathers; 4) involvement in their sons' education; 5) differences in parenting their sons versus typically developing siblings; and 6) changing views as fathers.

The six fathers who participated in this study have myriad experiences with their sons who have an autism spectrum disorder. Each father described positive relationships with their son. The positive relationships between the fathers and sons correlated to the positive perceptions and relationships each of the fathers shared with their own fathers. All fathers had concerns for their sons' futures and experienced the impact of negative behaviors associated with autism spectrum disorders on their family social life. Moreover, differences in concerns for the future and the impacts that their sons' behaviors had on family social life correlated to the differences in three separate age groups of the sons.

Differences were also present in how the fathers parented their sons with an autism spectrum disorder versus their typically developing children. Expectations of the other children in the family appeared to be higher with regard to behavior and social skills. All fathers were involved in some capacity with their sons' educations. This involvement varied from assisting with homework to fully participating in the educational decision-making

process. With regard to changing views on fatherhood, participants shared various responses. Changes included feelings of personal growth, development of patience, understanding of challenges, and growth in parental responsibility. This study offers several implications for school leaders and administrators and provides suggestions for further research.