**PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONING AND ADAPTATION OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER TRANSITIONING FROM EARLY INTERVENTION TO SCHOOL:  A MIXED METHODS APPROACH**

Authors: Stephanie Price, MA1, Dr. Veronica Smith, Ph.D.1

1 University of Alberta

Objectives:

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often experience difficulty adjusting to stress or adversity, especially when their environment is unpredictable or if there is a change in routine (McConachie, Hoole, & Le Couteur, 2011). Individuals with ASD are also at a greater risk of developing other mental health disorders (e.g., 70% met criteria for a second psychiatric disorder in Leyfer et al., 2006; 41% met criteria for two or more in Simonoff et al., 2008). A goal that is actively addressed in early intervention is generalization; that is, for children with ASD to be able to generalize the skills they have learned in treatment to the real world. One context that demands the generalization of skills learned in treatment is the transition from early intervention into the school system.

 The transition to school is a significant life event for all children, but it can be especially difficult for children with ASD (Levy & Perry, 2008; McConachie et al., 2001), specifically because of the nature of their disorder. For example, children with ASD have a preference for and are most successful with routine, structure, and consistency. The transition from early intervention to the school setting is therefore potentially a stressful event for children with ASD, likely resulting in a decreased ability to adjust to the new setting (McConachie et al., 2011; Rous & Hallam, 2012). Specific practices that facilitate successful transitions are beginning to be examined in the literature, but there is a dearth of research pertaining to the outcome of these transitions, particularly related to child adaptation (Rous & Hallam, 2012), as well as how various transition activities and contextual influences support or hinder adaptation.

Method:

 Using a mixed-methods approach, I am examining the psychological functioning of children with ASD immediately after they transition from early intervention into the school system, according to the perspective of their parents. The quantitative data will help to quantify the level of adaptation experienced by children with ASD, based on a standardized, parent-report measure of psychopathology and adaptive functioning, once they immediately transition to school. The qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with parents will help to identify key transition activities and experiences that may have impacted their level of functioning.

Results:

 Preliminary data from the pilot study will be discussed. What has been clear is that the transition from early intervention into school affects children differently, depending on their psychological functioning pre-transition. Results from the interview data suggest that parents find this transition particularly stressful in terms of preparation.

Discussion/Conclusions:

Transitions for children with ASD are a current concern in the literature and for service providers. Currently, transitions are gathering considerable interest, but the transition from early intervention into school for children with ASD specifically has gathered less interest and no research has looked at how they handle the transition in terms of psychological functioning. Furthermore, this research could be utilized to inform policies and procedures in how we support these children and their families through the transition.

Correspondence:

Stephanie Price, MA; University of Alberta; srprice1@ualberta.ca

Veronica Smith, PhD; University of Alberta; vs2@ualberta.ca