Evaluation of a Multidisciplinary Parent Education Program for Families of Children Recently Diagnosed with an ASD
K.V. Christodulu, M.L. Rinaldi, K. Knapp-Ines, & S.A. Fox

Background
Research indicates that parents of children with autism spectrum disorders experience greater levels of stress than parents of typically developing children and even parents of children with other disabilities and chronic illness (Haas et al., 2002; Tormark et al., 2004). In addition, parents of children with pervasive developmental disorders have been found to report a lower quality of life compared to parents of typically developing children (Magus et al., 2007). Recent studies suggest that providing parents of young children with autism information about the diagnosis and effective treatment practices through parent education programs and support groups can decrease parenting stress (Kean et al., 2006; Tonge et al., 2005) and improve overall quality of life (Shu & Luong, 2005). The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities at the University at Albany, in collaboration with CapitalCare Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics, developed an education program for parents/caregivers of children newly diagnosed with autism. Given the importance of families in the development, education, and behavioral support of children with this disability, it is imperative that programs aimed at increasing parent knowledge, decreasing parenting stress, and improving family quality of life be available in a timely manner in a format that is both efficient and effective. The parent education program is designed to assist families in accessing critical information on five topics specific to autism. Training modules for the program were selected from topics recognized by the CDC, NIH, and ASA, as well as other leading autism organizations, as important for parents and families.

Methods
Participants
Families were recruited to participate in this project through the network of programs, including parent groups and pediatric practices, associated with the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, a university-affiliated resource center located in Albany, NY. To participate in this project, each child was required to meet the following criteria: 1) have a primary diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder; 2) have received the diagnosis within 12 months; 3) be between the ages of 12 months and 5 years of age (a few exceptions were made for older children); 4) reside in one of the 9 counties comprising the Capital Region of New York State. Data are available on 59 parents whose children met the above criteria and completed the program.

Measures
Evaluation of the parent education program was conducted using reliable and valid tools. To assess level of parental stress, the Parenting Stress Index - Short Form (PSI-SF; Abidin, 1995) was given to parents. The Family Quality of Life Scale (FQLS; Summers et al., 2005) was used to gauge family life. A test of general knowledge of autism was also administered. Each of these measures was completed by parents prior to and following participation in the education program. In addition, to assess overall parent satisfaction with the education program (social validity), a parent satisfaction survey was administered following completion of the program.

Results
Autism Knowledge
Parents were asked to answer ten multiple-choice questions related to the characteristics and treatment of autism spectrum disorders prior to and following the parent education program. Prior to the program, parents answered an average of 75.0% of the questions correctly. Following the program, parents answered 77.6% of the questions correctly.

Parental Stress
Data suggests that following the education program, parents were reporting less stress overall. Specifically, parent stress scores on the PSI were on average at the elevated stress range (80th percentile) prior to treatment and fell within normal limits (33rd percentile) following treatment.

Family Quality of Life
Data suggest that parents are reporting improvements in quality of life following the program. Parents rated their family quality of life on a 5-point Likert scale (1=very dissatisfied, 5=dissatisfied, 3=neutral, satisfied, 4=very satisfied). Prior to the program, parents reported an average rating of 3.33 and following the program the average rating was 4.54. Data showed positive change in all subscales. The greatest change was reported in the area of emotional well-being, followed by positive change in parenting and family interaction.

Discussion
Data from evaluation of the parent education program indicate that families of children recently diagnosed with autism are greatly benefiting from participation. Overall, parents are highly satisfied with the program and following completion they are more knowledgeable about autism and report lower levels of stress and improved quality of life. A significant gap in services exists for this population, as little support is available for parents following a diagnosis of autism in their child. By developing an education program designed specifically for parents of newly identified children, we are providing an essential service that does not presently exist.