

1. Background

- Autistic students have mentioned that family support is helpful, but the role that family plays in autistic students' university journeys is not well understood [1].
- Existing research also lacks representation from family members, especially non-parental ones (e.g., siblings).
- Autism community members agree that this topic is a priority for research (see Methods).

2. Aims/Research Questions

- Understand autistic university students' family relationships and dynamics
- Understand how family members support autistic university students and vice versa
- Understand if and how family demographics might impact the support relationship between autistic students and their family members

3. Methods

- Community Involvement
- A steering group voted on the research topic and helped refine study design and materials
 - Group members were 4 autistic university students/graduates, 2 autism mentors, and 3 family members of autistic students
- Participants
- 26 autistic students (ages 19-55; 12 female, 4 male, 5 non-binary, 5 other description)
 - 8 parents, 3 siblings of autistic students (ages 19-69; 10 female, 1 male)
- Measures
- Individual semi-structured interview (Zoom, email exchange, in-person, and webchat)
 - Questions about university experiences and family involvement
- Analysis
- Common ideas ("themes") were identified from participants' responses through Reflexive Thematic Analysis [e.g., 2]

4. Key Findings

Theme 1: Impact of Mental Health and Other Co-Occurring Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students' physical and mental health difficulties impacted their university experiences and family supportBeing supported was helpful in students returning to or re-attempting university	<p><i>Impact on family support:</i> "[Daughter] went through a period of depression, which made it difficult to support the autism, as her mental health problems took priority." [Dawn B, parent]</p>
Theme 2: Family Relationships and Family Involvement are Heavily Intertwined	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Most family relationships positive; some neutral or strainedPositive relationships often corresponded to positive descriptions of support, e.g.:<ul style="list-style-type: none">Parents provided immediate help during crisesStudents helped siblings with academic workNegative relationships due to:<ul style="list-style-type: none">Family member not accepting of autismStudents had to heavily support their family membersOther determinants of and barriers to support included family members' available resources and students' independence	<p><i>Factors affecting support:</i> "We're really lucky because we have the family capacity to get involved and do what we can to help." [Harriet, parent] "I was really self-sufficient... I didn't want any help." [Zoe, student]</p>
Theme 3: The Role of Siblings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Siblings with recent university experience may help mitigate barriers to support<ul style="list-style-type: none">Often have more up-to-date knowledge than parentsMay be able to suggest relevant/targeted support options if autistic students/parents are not aware of themHelpful to feel understood by and have the option of support from siblings with similar experiences	<p><i>Information may be received differently when coming from a sibling compared to a parent:</i> "It's coming from the position of, like, 'Oh, I just heard about this thing that might be useful.'" [Ruby, sibling]</p>

5. Discussion, Implications & Conclusion

- Family members, especially parents, often remain involved in autistic students' university journeys [3].
- While many students benefit from family support, they also often provide support to their family members.
- Both student (e.g., desire for independence; co-occurring conditions) and family (e.g., financial situation; whether family members have been to university) factors impact the amount and direction of family support.
- Future research should investigate if and how family support impacts outcomes such as university completion and future employment.

References:
[1] Dallas, B. K., Ramisch, J. L., & McGowan, B. (2015). Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Role of Family in Postsecondary Settings: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Journal of postsecondary education and disability*, 28(2), 135-147.
[2] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 11(4), 589-597.
[3] Dallas, B., Ramisch, J., & Ashmore, A. (2018). How Involved Should They Be? Students with ASD in Postsecondary Settings and Their Family Members. *The qualitative report*, 23(5), 1208-1222.