

A Latino focus within autism: Moving forward with Grupo SALTO

Matie M. Ovalle, UIC LEND Family Faculty and Angelica Davila*, 2013-14 UIC LEND Fellow

In an effort to meet the void that many Latino families experienced Grupo SALTO (Sociedad de Autismo Latina Trabajando con Optimismo) was founded by Latino parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) and Hispanic program staff from the UIC Developmental Disabilities Family Clinics (DDFC) in 2003. Over the years Grupo SALTO has continued to grow to meet the everchanging needs and interests of families and children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Grupo SALTO aims to provide support for Latino families that have children with ASD by providing culturally and linguistically appropriate training, education, and services.

In 2007, The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) conducted a formal family needs assessment of Latino parents of children with ASD. The results produced an overwhelming concern regarding the therapy and services that Latino children with ASD received, as they were limited to school hours within a school setting. Barriers toward participating in out of school therapy and services included language, finances, transportation, ASD awareness, and cultural comfort. Latino children with an ASD were missing the much needed recreational and community opportunities that would help them develop skills and interests of importance to develop a future of independence. Consequently, Grupo SALTO (Latino Autism Society Working with Optimism) with the support of the DD Family Clinics' Hispanic team developed a comprehensive arts, dance, music, and sibling support group called "SALTO al ARTE" ("Jump into the ARTS") where children and adults rotated between the different



arts disciplines while parents attended monthly meetings related to ASD needs and services. This became one of the varied programs offered by Grupo SALTO.

To encourage more participation from prospective group parents, the organization also offers childcare in conjunction with its "SALTO al ARTE" program. Currently the dance class transitioned to the Chicago Park District in collaboration with The Mexican Folkloric Dance Company of Chicago.

In 2013, 450 registered families were a part of Grupo SALTO which had become the largest organization for Latino families with ASD in Illinois. An average of 50 families attend each monthly session; as well as 35-45 children, adolescents, and adults participate in the artistic programs, social group for individuals with ASD, sessions for persons with ASD, siblings' group, and childcare. Each monthly session is still conducted with the DDFC Hispanic Team staff. The Autism Program of Illinois (TAP), current and former Illinois LEND trainees, parents, and volunteers also participate. Grupo SALTO has no employees and relies

on annual fundraising activities, such as a banquet, donations, grants, and membership fees to sustain its programming.

Since the development of Grupo SALTO, various collaborations and success stories have occurred. These resulting projects align with the mission of the organization.

Empowering the ASD community

A Former IL LEND trainee worked with Grupo SALTO in coordinating and facilitating a group composed of five young adults with ASD using the Child-to-Child concept and methodology. The Child-to-Child concept is that children can act as mentors to other children on issues that are important to them. There are four steps in the Child-to-Child method, which are to observe, study, act, and evaluate. Using this approach participants that engaged in Child-to-Child programs showed a growth in the personal, physical, social, moral, and intellectual development (Khamis, 2006; Kangwa & Bonati, 2003; Hawes, 2003; Hanbury, 2007). Grupo SALTO wanted to use the Child-to-Child concept and methodology to



voice the concerns of children with ASD, as it had not yet been used with this population.

“Tu y Yo: A Child-to-Child approach to promoting social integration in the classroom” was implemented thanks to a grant from The Autism Program (TAP). The young adults in the group focused on the issue of bullying toward children with ASD using the Child-to-Child approach. The group concluded that a key root in bullying stemmed from the lack of knowledge and myths surrounding ASD. In order to act on this issue, the group created an English and Spanish PowerPoint titled, “Myths and Facts about Autism”.

The group presented these results at a Grupo SALTO benefit banquet, at a local YMCA, and schools. They also presented a more age appropriate presentation, “Fez and Elwood”, to local schools. The message was still the same: to embrace people’s differences.

The success of “*Tu y Yo*” is reflected in the support that they received from their audiences. The young adults that participated in “*Tu y Yo*” have planned to continue the program and conduct more activities with children during Grupo SALTO sessions. They have also expressed an interest in continuing to promote

the Child-to-Child approach at local schools.

Lending a hand for ASD awareness

IL LEND trainees have continued to support the mission of Grupo SALTO by coordinating several projects with them. A former trainee organized community screenings for ASD for Grupo SALTO’s registered families at the monthly sessions. She also coordinated a LEND team for 2014’s Walk Now for Autism Speaks in Chicago. She worked hard not only to assemble the screenings, but also in rallying up her fellow LEND trainees to assist in the screenings. This was familiar work for many of the trainees, as they had previously helped out with another Grupo SALTO sponsored screening events.

Bridging opportunities for young adults with ASD

A prominent worry that Grupo SALTO members have is what will happen to their child once they finish high school. It is a concern that is expressed at several of the monthly sessions. In order to address this concern and need in the community, Grupo SALTO has promoted its Sum-

mer Transition Program for the last four years. The program focuses on helping young adults with ASD enter college or other vocational endeavors by reinforcing college-essential skills, as well as providing them with ideas of how college will be different than high school.

The program consists of eight sessions within four weeks, and includes of both a young adult and parent group. DDFC Hispanic Program, and TAP staff help facilitate the parent group, while another team leader coordinates and facilitates the young adult group. DDFC staff mirror the topics discussed among the young adults during the parent sessions. The team leaders for the young adult group have mainly been former LEND trainees. The program also gives two young adults with autism the opportunity to work as classroom assistants, providing them with employment and leadership experience.

The success of the Summer Transition Program can be seen in the participants’ responses. Since there is communication between the parent group and the young adult’s group team leader, parents may often be surprised at the skills that their children possess. The young adults also benefit from the program’s not

only college readiness knowledge but also in practicing social skills with each other. In fact, the last session of the program is usually reserved for a social event, such as going out socially together. Here, the young adults are able to converse about similar interests.

Connecting parents through ASD interventions

Leadership is a skill that Grupo SALTO helps facilitate in families. An example of this is the Bilingual-Spanish IEP Parent Support Specialist training. During a six-part training, parents learned how to become IEP coaches for other parents to best resolve disputes that may arise between the schools and the parents of children with ASD. Another example of the leadership that parents may partake in is the *Promotoras de Salud /Parents Taking Action*, a research study at the Department of Disability and Human Development University of Illinois at Chicago where mothers of children with ASD are trained to mentor other mothers of children with ASD. The goal is that parents can mentor each other to create a better system of interventions.

Creating success stories with each step

In 2013 a grant from the UIC Institute for Policy was used to promote civic engagement to promote special education advocacy training for families of children with disabilities. The Family Clinics partnered with TAP, Easter Seals of DuPage County, Grupo SALTO, and the Family Resource Center on Disabilities. They set up a series of trainings with a focus on the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). They also conducted training in Spanish for the Latino community. At the end of the training, participants recorded their testimonials regarding the experience. These testimonials can be seen at the Family Clinics website: <http://www.ahs.uic.edu/dl/familyclinics/advocacy/>.

During this past summer, Latino fathers who attended Grupo SALTO sessions were encouraged to participate in a Father's Retreat called *La Esperanza: Creciendo y Mirando Hacia Adelante* (Growing and Looking Forward with Hope). Six fathers participated in the all day retreat at the Family Clinic. The group was composed of new opportunities to learn more about ASD and self-care

as a parent to a child with a disability. The open-question environment was aided with activities to facilitate the sharing of experience. The Father's Retreat stemmed from an annual women's support group, also called *La Esperanza*, which meets during the fall.

More success stories can be found in the Family Clinics Newsletters, available at: <http://www.ahs.uic.edu/cf/familyclinics/newsletter/>.

Conclusion

With the help of parents, volunteers, DDFC/TAP (The Autism Program) staff, and IL LEND trainees, Grupo SALTO is able to move forward with its mission. The organization creates opportunities for parents of children with ASD in leadership trainings and ASD education, as well as opportunities for young adults with ASD to have a voice of their own. As Grupo SALTO grows, it will continue to lessen the void felt by many families in the Latino community upon learning someone in their family has ASD. Creating a culturally embracing environment with volunteers that care about providing much needed services is what we are all about.

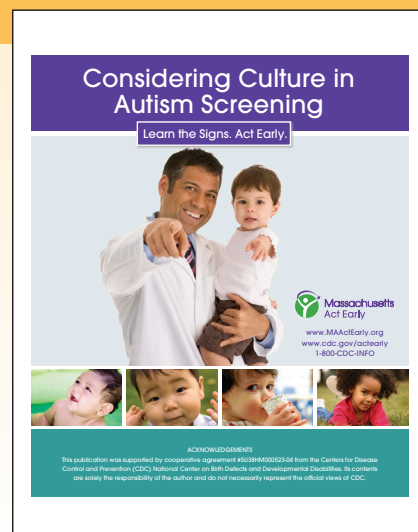
Massachusetts Act Early

This resource is available for everyone to use. Learn more by clicking on the link below.

Considering culture in autism screening kit

www.maactearly.org/considering-culture-screening-kit.html

The Massachusetts Act Early team developed materials for pediatric clinicians and community health center providers to use when conducting autism screening with children from families whose primary language is not English. These free materials may be downloaded and printed for use in practice.



Taking care

Maria and Eileen discover support in TAP Center at UIC Family Clinics

When her daughter Eileen was first diagnosed with ASD at age three, Maria felt lost. “Eileen wasn’t like other kids. She didn’t show emotion, play with toys, or talk,” her mother explains. “I felt very sad, thinking about my daughter’s future. I didn’t know what to do or where to go.”

But then Eileen’s social worker referred Maria to Family Clinics at University of Illinois-Chicago. This center, now run in partnership with The Autism Program of Illinois (TAP) under The Hope Institute, offers clinical services to children with ASD.

Eileen’s speech and language interventionist at the TAP Center/UIC Family Clinics has helped her develop skills she once struggled with — processing information, taking turns and good sportsmanship. She’s taught her how to express her emotions and helped her build social skills by working in groups with other kids.

Today a vibrant, loving, 11 year old, Eileen has reached many goals and continues aiming for new ones. Now Eileen is developing her concentration

skills. She practices therapeutic games to help her focus her attention, then applies the skills she learns in school.

Eileen’s love of dance also helps her focus - and build relationships. ASD makes it hard for Eileen to relate to other children her age. They often see her as different and don’t understand her. But her participation in a Mexican dance troupe for the past three years has allowed her to socialize with other kids in a setting where she feels at home. Her best friend, Tony, is in the dance company.

Maria has found solace at The TAP Center, too. She participates in Grupo SALTO a monthly parent support group for families that have children with ASD and that addresses topics such as behavior management strategies, communication and navigating special education services at school.

Today, Maria no longer feels lost. “I’m amazed at the progress Eileen has made. If it weren’t for the clinic, I don’t know where we would be today.” One of Eileen’s favorite places to be is on stage with the Mexican Folkloric Dance Company of Chicago.



The Mexican Folkloric Dance Company of Chicago performers (3 of them with with an ASD)