

Family Constellation and Autism Spectrum Disorder: Parents' Reports After Intervention

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Abstract

This study investigated the perceptions of biological and adoptive parents regarding the effects of Family Constellation on the behavior of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Ten families participated in the study, which assessed perceptions at three time points: immediately after the intervention, six months later, and five years after the beginning of the project. A 9-item Likert-scale questionnaire with open-ended responses was used. Statistical analysis included absolute and relative frequencies and Cochran's Q test. Only the item concerning family dynamics (Q5) showed a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.01$), indicating an immediate positive impact that, although reduced over time, remained relevant after five years. The other items maintained positive trends, as evidenced by reports of improvements in eye contact, communication, autonomy, and emotional bonds within the family. The results suggest that Family Constellation can be considered a philosophical approach applied to the improvement of family and systemic relationships, with potential benefits for the emotional and relational development of children with ASD. This pilot study revealed that Family Constellation may contribute to improvements in family dynamics and children's behavior even five years after the intervention. The consistently positive perception reported by parents over time supports the lasting nature of its effects.

Keywords: autism, family constellation, family.

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, as well as by restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. These symptoms are present from early development, although they may not become fully apparent until social demands exceed the child's capacities, and they cause clinically significant impairments in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (1). Within this context, systemic empathy is required, in which the entire system is activated, encompassing both parents and their children with ASD from diverse therapeutic perspectives (2). The family plays a fundamental role in emotional development and regulation, which may be influenced by collective

memory fields (3). Behavioral experiences within the family nucleus are transmitted to various areas of life, making a balanced and healthy relationship between parents and their children with ASD extremely important. Human beliefs and perceptions directly influence gene expression and cellular behavior, suggesting that changes in environment and consciousness may affect an individual's biology (4). However, research on ASD focused on family dynamics remains underdeveloped, as current materials are only beginning to explore the complex and reciprocal influences between individuals with ASD and other family members (5). To date, no studies have been identified that examine the effects of Family Constellation on the perceptions of parents or guardians of individuals with ASD. This study aimed to assess whether a targeted Family Constellation intervention, directed solely at parents, could lead to perceived improvements in children with ASD. By applying Systemic Family Constellation, the study sought to determine whether changes in the children's behavior and in family dynamics were reported by the parents.

Materials and Methods

Ten families with children diagnosed with ASD participated in the study. At the time of the research, these families were involved in the "From Absence to Presence Project", conducted in partnership with AMA (Association of Friends of People with Autism) in Videira, Santa Catarina (SC), Brazil. As a social initiative, the project did not require submission to an ethics committee. After agreeing to participate, all individuals signed the informed consent form (ICF), and only then did the interventions begin.

The research was conducted exclusively with the parents; the effects observed in the children resulted from indirect interventions carried out through their parents. Initially planned as entirely in-person, the sessions transitioned to online for the fourth, fifth, and sixth meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the assessments. The interventions began on December 21, 2019, and concluded on May 31, 2020.

Perception questionnaires were administered at three time points: immediately after the intervention (reaction assessment), six months later, and five years after the beginning of the project (follow-up assessment). The instrument comprised 9 Likert-scale items and open-ended prompts. The questions were as follows:

1. Do you believe Family Constellation had an important effect on your child's improvements?
2. Do you believe Family Constellation had positive effects on your child's eye contact?

3. Do you believe Family Constellation positively affected your feelings toward your child?
4. Do you believe Family Constellation positively influenced your interaction with your child?
5. Do you believe this family-centered approach, Family Constellation, affected your family's interaction dynamics?
6. Do you believe Family Constellation positively impacted your child's language and communication development?
7. Do you believe Family Constellation positively influenced how your child expresses emotions and feelings toward the family?
8. Do you believe Family Constellation had positive effects on your child's search for autonomy?
9. Would you recommend Family Constellation to other families with children diagnosed with ASD?

Parents were encouraged to justify their answers after each item.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies) and Cochran's Q test with SPSS v27.

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed a statistically significant effect for question Q5, related to family dynamics (Figure 1), where the proportion of "strongly agree" responses declined after six months but remained positive ($p = 0.01$). For the other items (Q1 to Q4 and Q6 to Q9, Table 1), no statistical differences were found, but a consistent trend toward positive responses was observed. The frequency of "strongly agree" responses was highest immediately after the intervention, and the disappearance of "undecided" responses after five years suggests consolidation of perceptions over time. Open-ended responses reinforced these findings, highlighting improvements in eye contact, autonomy, communication, and emotional relationships with the family.

The highest concentration of "strongly agree" responses occurred immediately after the intervention, reflecting a strong initial impact. Six months later, although this number decreased, positive evaluations prevailed, with an increase in "agree" responses and a small presence of "undecided" answers. After five years, the pattern intensified again, with a slight recovery in the most positive responses and the absence of negative or undecided responses.

Parents' open-ended justifications supported these findings. Many reported that, after the intervention, their children appeared calmer, with improved sleep, eye

contact, and autonomy. Others stated that they, as parents, began handling daily situations with greater emotional balance, which directly influenced their children's behavior. This collective and longitudinal perception suggests that even indirect interventions—such as those focused solely on parents—can produce significant effects on children's behavior and family harmony over time.

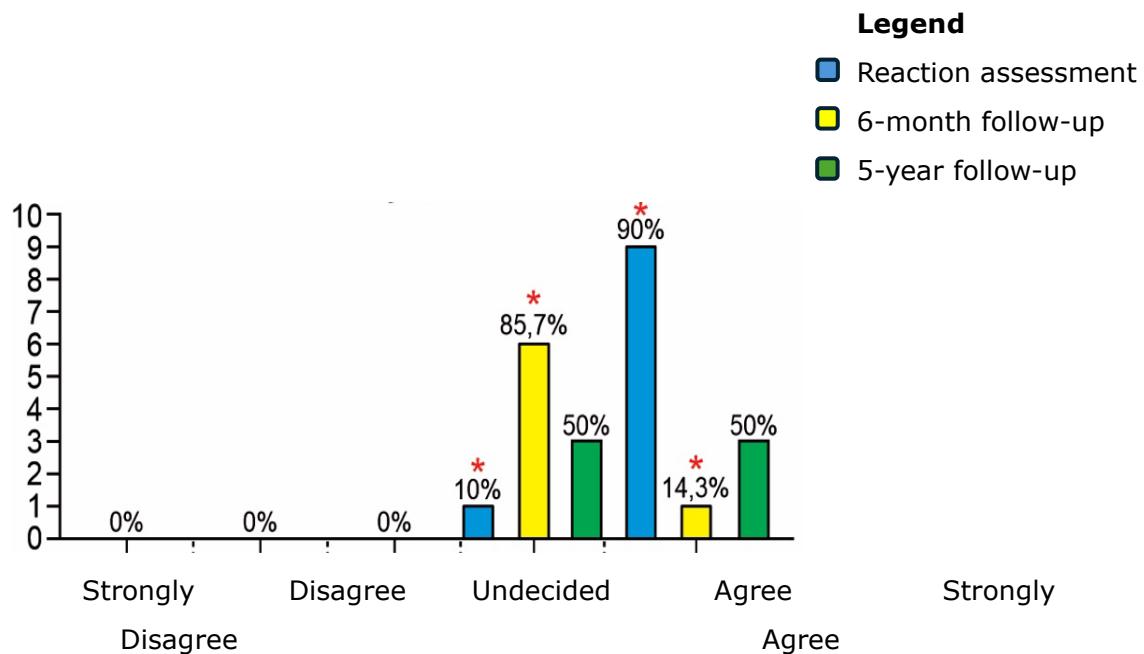
These findings gain further relevance in light of Lipton's theory (4), which posits that the environment, emotions, and particularly beliefs play a determining role in gene activation or silencing. Family Constellation, by addressing deep transgenerational issues and reframing personal and family histories, directly impacts parental perception. When beliefs are transformed into more constructive and balanced perspectives, a new psycho-emotional environment is created. According to Lipton (6), such an environment can positively influence cellular function and behavior. Thus, the perceived changes in children—even if indirect—are supported by this epigenetic theory, reinforcing the notion that shifts in parental consciousness reverberate both biologically and emotionally throughout the family system. In addition, Hellinger's systemic principles (7) support Family Constellation as a philosophical method applied to the improvement of family and systemic relationships.

	Reaction assessment					6-month follow-up					5-year follow-up				
	DT	D	I	C	CT	DT	D	I	C	CT	DT	D	I	C	CT
Q1	0	0	0	2	10	0	0	0	3	6	0	0	0	1	5
Q2	0	0	0	6	4	0	0	1	5	3	0	0	0	3	3
Q3	0	0	0	2	8	0	0	1	4	4	0	1	0	3	2
Q4	0	0	0	3	7	0	0	0	6	2	0	0	0	3	3
Q5	0	0	0	1	9	0	0	0	6	1	0	0	0	3	3
Q6	0	0	0	5	5	0	0	1	6	1	0	0	0	4	2
Q7	0	0	1	3	6	0	0	0	8	1	0	0	0	3	3
Q8	0	0	1	3	6	0	0	0	7	1	0	0	0	3	3
Q9	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	3	6	0	0	0	1	5

Abbreviations: Q1–Q9 refer to questions 1 through 9. At the 6-month follow-up after the Family Constellation intervention, 9 mothers answered all 9 questions. At the 5-year follow-up, only 6 mothers answered all 9 questions. Additionally, at the 6-month follow-up: 8 mothers answered question Q4; 7 mothers answered Q5; 8 mothers answered Q6; and 8 mothers answered Q8.

ST = strongly disagree; **D** = disagree; **U** = undecided; **A** = agree; **SA** = strongly agree.

Q5 – Do you believe that a family-centered approach, such as Family Constellation, has an effect on family interaction dynamics?



Response	%
Strongly Disagree	0%
Disagree	0%
Undecided	0%
Agree	85.7% (yellow), 50% (gray), 10% (blue)
Strongly Agree	90% (blue), 14.3% (yellow), 50% (gray)

(gray) The red asterisks indicate significant values ($p = 0.01$).

Conclusion and Limitations

Family Constellation may foster improvements in family dynamics and the behavior of children with ASD. This is a pilot study with methodological limitations, such as a small sample size and the absence of a validated questionnaire. Research on ASD with a focus on family dynamics is crucial to better understand the impact of such disorders and to inform clinical support services for families.

Future studies should explore behavioral changes in children with ASD and family dynamics following Family Constellation interventions, using validated instruments.

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