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**OLLSCOIL NA  
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# **The Parent Connection:**

## **The Power of Peer Support for Parents of Children with Complex Needs**

### **Executive Summary**



### The Project:

Researchers at the University of Galway in partnership with Enable Ireland, aimed to measure the impact of a peer support intervention, for parents of children with complex needs and disabilities.



### Peer to Peer Support:

Peer to peer support is an informal type of support which aims to meet emotional, social contact and practical needs. It describes the process of giving and receiving support between two people who share similar life experiences.



### The Participants:

1

#### Recipient Parents

10 Parents of children with complex needs receiving peer support.

2

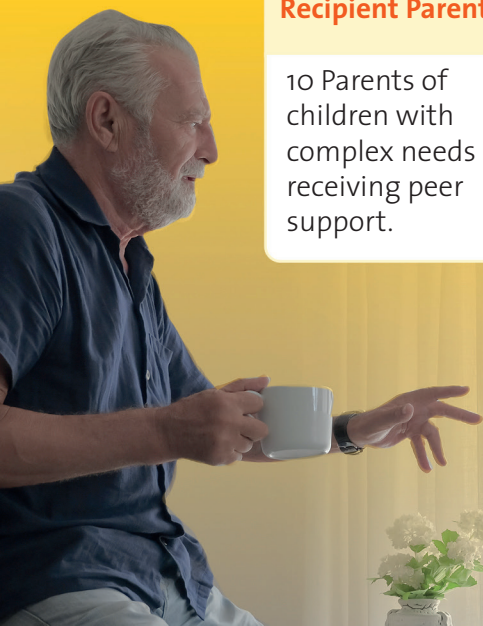
#### Support Parents

10 Parents of children with complex needs providing peer support.

3

#### Enable Ireland Staff Members

10 Staff members providing formal supervision to support parents.



Experienced parents of children with complex needs were provided with support parent training and subsequently provided peer support to their parent match, over a 12-week period in 2024. Enable Ireland staff members provided supervision sessions to support parents at monthly intervals.



## The Research

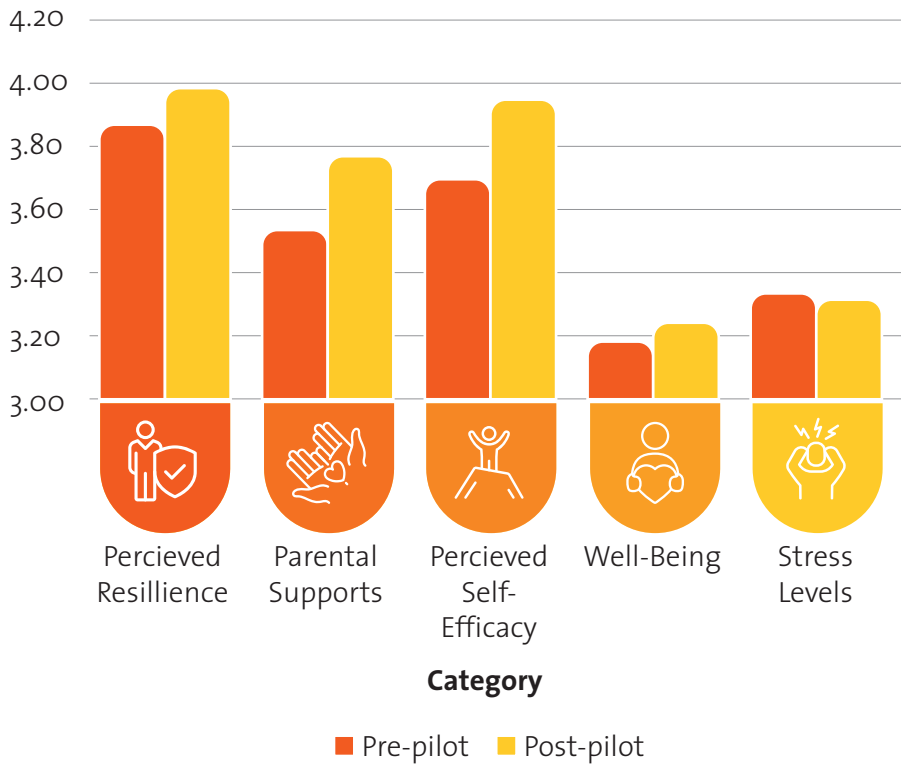
This mixed method study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the impact of peer support for parents providing support, receiving support and staff involved in the project. Questionnaires and focus groups were used to collect data from parent participants both before and after the peer support intervention. Interviews were conducted with staff members.

## The Results

Peer support can lead to meaningful improvements in parental efficacy and perceptions of current supports. Results propose that support parents wish to use their shared lived experiences to instil a sense of hope, connection and community for parents starting their journey. Findings indicate that the impact of peer support can create a ripple effect, presenting learning opportunities for staff and more profound insights into the reality of life for parents and families. Results highlight the growing support needs of parents of autistic children.

# Positive Impact for Recipient Parents in Pilot Project

Recipient Parent Group Level Changes on the Five Questionnaire Scales Pre / Post Peer Support Intervention



## Key Findings

- There was a notable improvement in overall scores on the perceived resilience scale, demonstrating a slight improvement in the parent’s ability to cope and be resilient in parenting a child with additional needs.

- One of the largest gains was in perceptions of participant's parental supports. This suggests that the peer support project led to meaningful improvement in parent's perceptions of their current support system after the program. The item with the largest overall increase on this scale was:

**"I have people to talk to who understand how I feel."**

- The largest gain was in perceptions of parental self-efficacy for parenting a child with complex needs. This suggests that the peer support project had a moderate to strong positive effect on how parents perceived their ability to manage the complexities of parenting a child with additional needs. The largest increase for an item on this scale was on the item:

**"I know how to help and support my child to reach their full potential."**

- There was a notable improvement in over-all scores on the well-being scale.
- There was a very small but not notable decrease in scores of the perceived stress levels scale.
- There was a significant gain on the item:

**"I feel I cope well with the demands of parenting."**

## Recipient Parents' Experience:

"[It was so valuable] to chat once a week to someone in the same if not worse situation than I am in! We totally understood how difficult it can be to have a child with extra needs that none of our friends had experience with so didn't understand!"

"[It made a difference] having someone to talk to who understands and is empathetic."

"[I] came to know about a couple of support systems available for my child, especially when transitioning to secondary school."

"[My match provided] information on some (voluntary) supports I hadn't been aware of."

"[I gained] confidence in continuing to do us! I doubted myself at times, but speaking to someone in a similar position made me realise no one knows our kids like we do."





## Support Parents' Experiences:

"It felt like a community. I thought that the training was a good balance of us being able to share some of our own lived experience."

"I know every child, every situation, isn't the same. But if it's the journey that we travelled that we.. we could pass on... maybe our experiences."

"It made me more resilient as I reflected on my own past."

"It reframed a lot of things for me....it paints them in a more positive light."

"There was just an authenticity to this [pilot programme]...it didn't feel like just a piece of research, or just a piece of work."

## Recommendations

Parent peer support should be rolled out more broadly and complement existing formal service provision, providing meaningful emotional and practical support for parents of children with complex needs. Parents should be fundamental in the planning and delivery of future parent peer support initiatives. Further research is necessary to determine the unique support needs of parents of autistic children.

## About this project

A joint initiative between primary investigators, Dr. Lhara Mullins and Dr. Devon Goodwin, at the University of Galway and Enable Ireland. This project was supported by the JBDB Fund at Community Foundation Ireland and The TK Maxx and Homesense Foundation.



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