

Service Delivery Experiences and Intervention Needs of Military Families with Children with ASD

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ABSTRACT

“The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of military families with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) specifically as it relates to relocation. Online survey methodology was used to gather information from military spouses with children with ASD. The finalized dataset included 189 cases. Descriptive statistics and frequency analyses were used to examine participant demographics and service delivery questions. Results indicated the larger sample of military spouses largely confirmed the experiences reported qualitatively in previous studies and contributed information that was previously unknown about variables associated with the access, availability, quality, and frequency of intervention services for military families with children with ASD.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been on the rise, currently affecting approximately 1 in 68 children. Previous research on military relocations and ASD has shown that relocation to a new military installation can be accompanied by recurring issues with intervention services for families with children with ASD. However, research on this topic is limited. Given the prevalence of ASD and the recurring issues related to servicing military families with children with ASD, this study describes the service delivery challenges and intervention needs of military families with children with ASD who have relocated.
- More than 97 percent of the military spouses surveyed reported that their child with ASD had at least one medium level intervention need. However, they indicated several barriers when describing their service delivery experiences, including accessing needed interventions, limited availability and proximity of providers, lack of continuity among service plans, and unsatisfactory quality of school interventions.
- Given that military families with children with ASD reported several service delivery barriers, especially around accessing interventions for their child with ASD, targeting access barriers may be an effective starting place for improving service delivery to military families. One support that might benefit military families with children with ASD is a military-spouse mentor program that links families with children with ASD at a base with other families with children with ASD who are relocating to that base.



IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Given the importance of support groups for families with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), military spouses should continue to form and join support networks, such as the American Military Families Autism Support. Military families with children with ASD living on a military base should consider serving as a mentor to new families on the base. Military families serving as mentors could offer information on the schools, community resources and how to find appropriate service providers in the area. To ameliorate the disconnect between relocations, school districts serving military families should review ways to reduce pause in services, including expanding available services and resources. School districts could address the disconnect between relocations by having intervention specialist(s) meet with military families prior to relocation. The intervention specialist and families meeting sooner could help ensure necessary interventions and services are provided without a gap in service(s), which might also improve satisfaction with school interventions. Schools serving military children in grades pre-K through 12 should work together to detail a transition plan or protocol that outlines responsibilities for the old school, new school, and the military family. A detailed transition plan/protocol could facilitate a smoother transition and aid in the continuity of a child's individualized education plan (IEP).

FOR POLICY

Given the needs of military families with children with ASD, the Department of Defense (DoD) might aid military families in acquiring necessary services for their families and children. To support military families, the DoD might continue encouraging support networks and mentorships on its bases. Though reducing relocations may not be a feasible option, the DoD might explore reducing relocations for military families. Additionally, the DoD might explore how telehealth interventions can assist military families in obtaining necessary services. The DoD and policymakers might partner to increase awareness of Tricare providers. The DoD and policymakers might do this by creating a website that details which providers accept Tricare by location. On this website, the DoD and policymakers might also include information on available resources, including programs and advocacy groups. To allow for future research to be representative, the DoD might conduct its own anonymous research on the service delivery needs of military families with children with ASD.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite a majority of military spouses reporting barriers to the delivery of services for their children with ASD, some respondents reported no difficulties. More research is needed to learn best practices for service delivery for military families with children with ASD. Future studies on service delivery experiences should include other stakeholders, e.g., military leaders, healthcare service providers, Exceptional Family Member Program personnel, and school districts that serve military families. The respondents included in this sample were a self-selected convenience sample, not a randomized sample of the population. Therefore, the respondents may not be representative of the entire military population of military families with children with ASD. Additionally, the survey was open to military families with a child with any developmental disability. Future studies should verify developmental disability, and concentrate on a specific disorder or disability. A limitation of this study is that it was limited to active duty military spouses. Since experiences can vary, future studies should include other stakeholders, including military service members and Reserve and National Guard. Future research is needed on which part of the service delivery process poses difficulty for military families with children with ASD.

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