

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Understanding Military Families who Have Dependents With Special Health Care and/or Educational Needs

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SUMMARY: Families with a dependent who has special health care or educational needs can experience stressful challenges. The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) assists military families with identifying military and community support services through a family support provider. This study surveyed family support providers to understand the experiences and current challenges of the military families with whom they work.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Respondents identified Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder as among the more frequent special health care or educational needs present in families.
- In many cases, families had dependents with multiple special health care or educational needs.
- Family support providers noted that relocation for the families they work with was highly stressful and the continuity of care was difficult to manage during those times.
- Among the more highly requested services family support providers offered was advocacy for school-related problems and liaising with community agencies for extra social services for military families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide group support for families with dependents with special health care or educational needs
- Create a toolkit of community and online resources for families who qualify to receive EMFP services
- Make available research-based pamphlets or fliers that educate community support providers about the unique challenges military families face during relocation or other stressful periods

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend regular professional support and development for family support providers to keep current on research and reduce potential professional burnout
- Encourage military family members to engage in stress management techniques and courses
- Support continued collaboration between local education and community support providers in serving the needs of military families with dependents with special health care or educational needs

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METHODS

- Each of the 323 family support providers were emailed an invitation to complete a 15-20-minute web-based survey; 146 family support providers completed the survey.
- The survey was developed with the Department of Defense, Office of Community Support for Military Families with Special Needs.
- The survey consisted of four sections: background information, caseload composition, professional support and development, and perceptions of military family needs.

PARTICIPANTS

- Each branch of the military was represented by family support providers responding: 63 from Army, 34 from Air Force, 27 from Marine Corps, 22 from Navy, with a total response rate of 52.5%.
- Just over half (53%) of family support providers had at least a Master's Degree for the highest level of education and 52% reported a caseload of under 200 families, although 21% did not respond with the number of families in their caseload.
- Fifty-six percent of family support providers responded with the number of years in their current position as between 1 and 5 years and 19% reported being at their current position for less than one year

LIMITATIONS

- The survey was not able to include questions related to the demographics of the families the family support providers work with, so it is not clear whether the dependents were children or adults
- While the overall proportion of military branches was well-represented, there was an underrepresentation of family support providers from the Army and an overrepresentation from the Marines, which makes it difficult to generalize the results.
- There were no questions relating to the current adequacy or availability of resources within the military or civilian communities, so there were no attempts to assess the quality of the EFMP services.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore any differences between child and adult dependents with special health care or educational needs in order to develop appropriate care and services for families
- Attempt to reach a more accurate representation of family support providers from each branch
- Assess the EFMP as a program to understand its strengths and weaknesses for evaluative purposes

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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