

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## The Experience of Military Families With Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders During Relocation and Separation

Davis, J. M., & Finke, E. H. (2015). The experience of military families with children with autism spectrum disorders during relocation and separation. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(7), 2019-2034.

**SUMMARY:** Spouses and partners of Active Duty Service members with one young child with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder were interviewed to gather information on their experiences in the military. The parents described difficulties with obtaining services for autism spectrum disorders as a result of relocation and increased emotional and behavioral problems exhibited by their children as a result of relocation and separation.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Participants experienced challenges due to therapeutic service accessibility and continuity (e.g., limited providers, access to services, and delays in services).
- Parents noticed an increase in family stress and negative emotional and behavioral problems in their children with autism spectrum disorder after moving to a new location.
- Parents reported difficulties coordinating autism spectrum disorder services and therapy; these difficulties were compounded by limited access to extended family and inconsistent community support during deployments.
- Parents described increases in child stress, anxiety, and challenging behaviors during separations.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Collaborate with therapeutic service professionals for children with autism spectrum disorders to facilitate connection to services for these families
- Develop a list of local service providers for children with autism spectrum disorders to distribute to families
- Provide support groups for parents of children living with autism spectrum disorders

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Collaborate with community services to provide respite care for families with children with autism spectrum disorders, especially while the Service member is deployed
- Encourage military families to enroll in services when they receive orders instead of requiring them to wait until they physically arrive at the new location
- Recommend professional development for professionals who work with military families to educate them about unique factors that contribute to stress for families with children who have special needs

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## METHODS

- Military spouses who had 6-12 year old child with autism spectrum disorder were recruited via online discussion groups and social media; 17% of those who expressed interest participated.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video messaging. Interview questions addressed the process of getting the autism diagnosis, experiences obtaining and maintaining services, and how being in the military has impacted their experience.
- The transcribed interviews were analyzed to identify themes among parents' responses.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Fifteen female partners of Active Duty Service members participated.
- Forty percent of partners were in the Army, 20% Navy, 20% Air Force, 13% Coast Guard, 7% Marine Corps.
- Racial ethnic composition was 80% White, 13% Native American, and 7% Black. No other demographic information was aggregated.

## LIMITATIONS

- The sample size was small, which limits the ability to generalize the results to other populations.
- The sample was not random, and those who chose to participate may have been different from those in the military as a whole.
- Only military wives' perspectives were included.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Gather data from more military families with children with autism spectrum disorders to determine the needs of a larger sample
- Include the Service members' perspectives and analyze results across services available across different Service branches.
- Include the perspectives of high-functioning children with autism spectrum disorder about their needs and experiences

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:  
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>