

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Parent Expectations Mediate Outcomes for Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Kirby, A. V. (2016). Parent expectations mediate outcomes for young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder.. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 46(5), 1643-1655. doi:10.1007/s10803-015-2691-3

**SUMMARY:** A small minority of youth diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are able to attain success in areas of independence and functioning as young adults. Associations between baseline family demographics, child functioning, and parent expectations, and five-year follow-up measures of child employment, independent living, and social participation were examined. Findings suggest parents' expectations for their child's outcomes have an important impact on later success for youth with ASD.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth diagnosed with ASD with more advantageous family demographic factors (i.e., race, income, mother's education) and who had higher functioning at baseline (i.e., academic achievement, self-care ability, social skills), had better outcomes at a five-year follow-up.
- Parent expectations for their children fully accounted for the relationships between family background and functioning at baseline and young adult outcomes.
- This results of this study suggest that family background and child functioning predicts parent expectations for their children diagnosed with ASD, which in turn predicts child outcomes.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Facilitate groups that provide military youth diagnosed with ASD with an adult mentor in order to encourage high expectations and continuous skill-building
- Collaborate with programs connected with military parents to emphasize the importance of positive expectations and support for building skills and functional abilities for youth with ASD

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military parents with children with ASD on realistic expectations about independence, employment, and social functioning, as well as ways to support achievement in those areas
- Offer classes for military youth with ASD and their parents to provide both emotional support and skill-building training

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education about ASD and outcomes for all providers working with military families
- Encourage collaboration between the Department of Defense and community programs for youth with ASD to promote these programs and make them easily accessible to military families

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## METHODS

- Data was drawn from a national longitudinal study, which surveyed parents and school records of five randomly selected cohorts of youth in special education.
- Data about youth diagnosed with ASD were collected at baseline, when they were 13 to 16 years of age, and at a five-year follow-up.
- The relationships between family demographic factors, child functioning factors, parent expectations, and young adult outcomes were examined.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 1,170 youth who were diagnosed with ASD, had an average baseline age of 14.7 years (SD = 1.2), and were primarily male (83%); parents surveyed were 90% mothers.
- Data for all participants with completed surveys were included in analyses; however, only 770 youth had surveys completed at the five-year follow-up (i.e., 34% attrition rate).
- Participants included primarily White (56%), Black (24%), and Latino (9%) youth.

## LIMITATIONS

- The study had high participant attrition, and participants who completed the five-year follow-up had significantly higher family income and maternal education and included fewer minorities.
- Some youth in the sample were still in school and eligible for special education at the time of the five-year follow-up rather than transitioning to employment and independent living.
- Child ASD diagnosis was measured via parent or school report rather than research assessment, which may have resulted in inconsistency in the criteria used to diagnose and report ASD.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine whether outcomes of youth diagnosed with ASD can be changed through education and intervention focused on parent expectations for those youth
- Explore associations between the personal expectations of youth diagnosed with ASD and their relationship with parent expectations, demographic and functioning factors, and outcomes
- Identify additional factors, such as professional opinions or parent belief systems, that may contribute to parent expectations of outcomes for youth diagnosed with ASD.

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>