

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Optimism and Positive and Negative Feelings in Parents of Young Children with Developmental Delay

Kurtz-Nelson, E., & McIntyre, L.L. (2017). Optimism and positive and negative feelings in parents of young children with developmental delay. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 61 (7), 719-725. doi:10.1111/jir.12378

SUMMARY: Parenting and child problem behaviors are influenced by the parents' positive and negative feelings toward the child. However, among parents who have children with developmental delays, little is known about the factors that contribute to their positive and negative feelings. This study sought to examine how parental optimism influences positive and negative feelings for parents.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Increased optimism in parents was shown to increase positive feelings and decrease negative feelings toward their child with developmental delay.
- When a parent is experiencing high levels of parenting stress, higher levels of optimism were found to increase parents' positive feelings toward their child.
- Positive feelings toward the child were associated with decreased internalizing and externalizing problems whereas negative feelings were associated with increased internalizing and externalizing problems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Facilitate support groups for parents and primary caregivers of children with developmental delays to promote a sense of community and support
- Encourage parents or primary caregivers to engage in education, activities, groups, or to seek the help of mental health professionals with the aim to learn skills and techniques that reduce parenting stress

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education, activities, or promote curriculum that builds coping behaviors and decreases parental stress
- Offer classes focused on teaching parents and caregivers to increase optimism and how that relates to the relationship they have with their child

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs for the identification and prevention of stress in military families
- Encourage the training of professionals to better identify parents of children with developmental delays who may also be experiencing high stress situations, including deployment and permanent change of station

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METHODS

- Primary caregivers were recruited in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States from agencies specializing in early intervention and childhood special education programs.
- Questionnaires and a family demographics interview were delivered in the mail and completed by the child's primary caregiver. Questionnaires include the Child Behavior Checklist for Ages 1.5-5, the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form, the Revised Life Orientation Test (to measure optimism), and the Parent Feelings Questionnaire.
- Researchers analyzed the data to examine the relationships between optimism, parenting stress, and positive and negative feelings toward children with developmental delays. The analyses primarily focused on how optimism can influence parents' feelings toward and their relationships with that child.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 119 primary caregivers of preschool-aged children. To be eligible, children had to meet state criteria for having a developmental delay.
- Among the sample, parents and caregivers were mostly female (92%) and White (82%).
- Within the group of female parents and caregivers, 79% were the children's biological mother.
- Child demographics were 90% female and 77% were White.

LIMITATIONS

- All measures were self-report from the parent or primary caregiver which may bias results (e.g., parents or caregivers might avoid discussing negative feelings they have toward their child).
- Most of the participants of this study were White females recruited from the same region; therefore, the results may not be reflective of other groups or broader populations.
- Data were only gathered once and therefore there is little understanding regarding whether levels of optimism influence positive and negative feelings or whether positive and negative feelings influence levels of optimism.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use an observational design that observes child behavior and parent positive and negative affect during parent-child interactions
- Diversify the sample by including parents, primary caregivers, and children of different ethnicities and military families to increase generalizability
- Consider a longitudinal approach to examine how optimism and feelings about children with developmental delays affect each other over time

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