

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Improved Social Skills in Children With Developmental Delays After Parent Participation in MBSR: The Role of Parent-Child Relational Factors

Lewallen, A. C., & Neece, C. L. (2015). Improved social skills in children with developmental delays after parent participation in MBSR: The role of parent-child relational factors. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(10), 3117-3129. doi:10.1007/s10826-015-0116-8

**SUMMARY:** Having a child with a developmental disability can significantly increase parenting stress, which is associated with poorer child outcomes. This study investigated the association between mothers' involvement in a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program and child outcomes. The mothers' participation in the MBSR program was associated with significant improvements in outcomes for both mothers themselves and their children.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Parents participating in the MBSR program experienced significantly less parental stress, depression, and child behavior problems and significantly greater life satisfaction after participation.
- Children of parents who participated in the MBSR program showed increased social skills after the program finished, including greater self-control, assertion, empathy, and engagement.
- Changes in children's self-control were noted across mother, father, and teacher reports.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Help parents of children with special needs to understand the benefits of mindfulness during day-to-day activities
- Work with parents to identify resources that can reduce the amount of stress they may experience related to having a child with special needs

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide workshops to help Service members and their families develop skills to cultivate mindfulness
- Develop classes that teach parents of children with special needs various methods of stress relief

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training for professionals who work with military families regarding the stress faced by families with children with special needs
- Continue to support the implementation of programs for military families that include an individual with special needs

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited in California from a center through which they received services for their children with developmental disabilities.
- Mothers completed questionnaires about parenting stress, child symptoms, and child social functioning before and after participating in an 8-week MBSR program. Fathers and teachers also completed questionnaires about child symptoms and social functioning at those times.
- Changes in mothers' well-being and children's symptoms and social skills were compared before and after the intervention to examine any possible impact of the intervention.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 24 mothers of children with a developmental disability and behavioral problems.
- Average age of the children (67% boys) was 3.4 years old (SD = .82); based on a symptom rating scale, 83% of the children were "very likely" to have a diagnosis of autism.
- The sample was 33% White, 38% Latino, 8% Asian-American, and 21% reporting another race/ethnicity.

## LIMITATIONS

- A control group was not used, so it is unclear whether participation in the program caused the observed changes for mothers and children.
- All participants were mothers; the same results may not extend to other caregivers' participation in such programs.
- Participants came from a geographically-limited area; individuals from other regions may experience different results from participation in such a program.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Employ the use of a control group to determine whether the intervention causes changes in outcomes for parents and children
- Include mothers, fathers, and other caregivers in the intervention to examine whether results extend to these other groups
- Examine the usefulness of this type of program for military families with children with special needs

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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