

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Caregiving for Youth with Co-Occurring Developmental Disabilities and Behavioral Health Issues When Caregivers Face Additional Health-Related Stressors: Analysis of Risk and Protective Factors From a National Sample

McCarthy, M. J., Behimer, G., Anderson, J. A., & Riddell, I. (2016). Caregiving for youth with co-occurring developmental disabilities and behavioral health issues when caregivers face additional health-related stressors: Analysis of risk and protective factors from a national sample. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 59*, 399-409.  
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**SUMMARY:** Caring for a child with a developmental disability can be stressful and may be particularly difficult when additional stressors are added. Risk and protective factors for caregivers of children with developmental disabilities were compared for families with no, minor, or major additional health concerns. These caregivers handled extreme levels of stress (e.g., emotional, financial, relational) related to their child's disorder, but more support from family and friends seemed to buffer caregiver stress.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Caregivers, in general and in particular those with additional major health stressors, had very high rates of unemployment (52%, 67%) and poverty (71%, 75%), respectively.
- Higher family functioning and time for self-care were associated with less caregiver emotional stress at follow-up.
- More child internalizing and externalizing behaviors were associated with greater emotional stress and number of stressful events among caregivers at follow-up.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Attend trainings about how to support caregivers of youth with developmental disabilities
- Facilitate support groups for military families with youth with a developmental disability

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military parents who are caregivers of youth with developmental disabilities about the risk and protective factors for their own adjustment and well-being
- Provide workshops for military families with a child with developmental disabilities to learn improved family communication, decision-making, and support

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support programs that offer help to military caregivers of children with developmental disabilities to find employment and childcare
- Recommend providing mental health resource referrals in all military parenting programs

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## METHODS

- Data from caregivers of youth with a developmental disability and co-occurring behavioral health problem were drawn from a Children's Mental Health Initiative study of at-risk families.
- Caregivers completed baseline and six-month follow-up questionnaires about family support services, stressors, youth's behaviors and disabilities, self-care, and family functioning.
- Caregivers' stressors and risk and protective factors were compared between caregivers with either no, minor, or major additional health stressors of themselves or another family member.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 600 caregivers (M = 39.15 years, SD = 9.67) who were 92% female and primarily biological parents (76%), grandparents (8%), or foster, adoptive, or step-parents (13%).
- Caregivers had either no (34%), minor (51%), or major (16%) additional family health stressors.
- Caregivers' children with developmental disabilities were ages 6-20 years and 72% male.
- Caregivers identified as White (56%), Black (22%), Latino (12%), Multiracial (6%), Native American (2%), or Asian American (1%).

## LIMITATIONS

- Participant drop-out was problematic (26%), and participants who remained in the study reported more child internalizing and caregiver mental health problems at baseline.
- Caregivers were 92% female, and results may not generalize to male caregivers.
- It is unclear how seriousness of additional health concern groups were determined, and researchers' subjectivity may have influenced the results.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Compare differences in caregiver stress when additional health problems are related to either the caregiver's or another family member's health
- Examine differences in male and female caregiver stress levels in high-stress family situations
- Explore voluntary and involuntary factors related to caregiver unemployment

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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