

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

A Strength-Based Approach to Parent Education for Children with Autism

Mossman Steiner, A. (2011). A strength-based approach to parent education for children with autism. *Journal of Positive Behavior, 13*(3), 178-190. doi:10.1177/1098300710384134

SUMMARY: There are multiple approaches to parent education. This study used a small sample (N = 3) of children with autism and their mothers to investigate different outcomes when providing parent education through strengths-based versus deficit-based approaches. Though there is difficulty making firm conclusions because of the extremely small sample size, there did seem to be benefits to the strengths-based approach.

KEY FINDINGS:

- When educators used a strengths-based approach to parent education, parents showed more positive emotions and parent-child interactions were enhanced.
- Parents tended to make more negative statements about their children and show more negative emotion when educators used a deficit-based approach to parent education.
- Due to the study design, researchers were not able to identify whether the two approaches were associated with different child behavior outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Use strengths-based language when speaking with families about their children
- Work with children and youth to help them identify their own strengths

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide workshops for parents of children with special needs to help them identify their children's strengths
- Train program staff regarding the possible impact of different ways of talking about children with special needs and their challenges

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage training for professionals who work with military families with children with special needs regarding how to use strengths-based communication
- Continue to support programs that aim to assist military families that include individuals with special needs

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METHODS

- The first three families who contacted a university autism center seeking parent education services were included in the study.
- Parent and child behaviors were rated before parent education began and were again rated throughout the course of parent education sessions and when the sessions were finished.
- Educators provided parents strategies to increase children's communication while framing the child's behavior as a deficit or as a strength; they alternated between these approaches every ten minutes.
- Parent and child behaviors and interactions during the intervals of the deficit-based approach were compared to behaviors and interactions during the strengths-based approach.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were three two-year-old children with autism and their primary caregivers.
- Two of the children were White and one was Asian American; all three children were male.
- All three parents were the child's mother. Two were 30 years old and one was 34 years old.

LIMITATIONS

- Children in the study were three two-year-olds with autism; because of the very small and specific sample, results cannot be generalized to a wider population.
- Families who were included in the study were seeking out parent education programs, and they may differ from other families in ways that may influence results.
- Educators alternated between strengths- and deficit-based approaches every ten minutes; this is likely too short of a time to see meaningful differences in parent and child response.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study with a larger, more diverse sample and with longer periods of each approach
- Invite a wide range of families to participate in a study examining the efficacy of a strengths-based approach
- Compare an education program that is completely strengths-based to a neutral education program or a control group

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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