

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Parental Stress, Discipline Strategies, and Child Behavior Problems in Families with Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Shawler, P. M., & Sullivan, M. A. (2017). Parental stress, discipline strategies, and child behavior problems in families with young children with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 32(2), 142-151. doi:10.1177/1088357615610114

SUMMARY: Stress and disruptive behavior in children are often topics of concern among parents. This study examined the association between parental stress, parenting strategies, and disruptive behavior problems in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Parental stress was elevated in parents with children with ASD, and children with ASD had increased problem behaviors when parents used harsh or punitive strategies.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Less harsh parent discipline strategies were associated with fewer child disruptive behaviors, and regardless of parent stress levels, children's behavior was worse when harsh strategies were used.
- Parents had high levels of parental stress: 38% of the parents demonstrated clinically significant levels of stress and 41% of parents reported clinically significant child disruptive behavior.
- Three parenting strategies were discussed: overreactive (e.g., displaying anger or irritability), lax (e.g., giving in), or verbose (e.g., discussion). Overreactive parenting strategies were most related with more challenging behavior in the children with ASD.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with ASD treatment programs and parenting programs to develop a comprehensive approach for working with Service members who have children with ASD
- Develop workshops to help Service members better cope with the dual stressors of being a military parent and having a child with ASD

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Disseminate information to military parents regarding available resources for those parenting children with ASD
- Implement comprehensive family training programs for military families with children with ASD that address child problem behavior, effective parenting strategies, and parent stress

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Evaluate current civilian programs for parenting children with ASD and consider additional components specific to military families
- Encourage the training of professionals who work with Service members to learn more about the unique aspects of parenting children with ASD and other special developmental needs

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Participants were recruited via a national online database, the Interactive Autism Network (IAN) Research Center, where parents voluntarily enroll to participate in autism research. Response rates are unknown as only the first 130 families to volunteer were included in the study.
- Data were gathered through surveys completed by the parents.
- Autism symptoms and child disruptive behavior were measured separately. Excluding autism symptoms allowed the direct effects of parental stress and parenting strategies on child disruptive behavior to be measured.

PARTICIPANTS

- The children were 3 to 11 years old (mean = 8.57, SD = 2.36); 116 were male and 14 were female. Parents were 24 to 58 years old (mean = 39.81, SD = 6.56); 115 were biological mothers, 11 were biological fathers, and four were adoptive mothers.
- Ninety-one percent of the participants were White. No other data were provided regarding the race/ethnicity of the sample.
- One hundred and ten of the original 130 families were included in the full analysis; twenty families were excluded due to incomplete data.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was mostly White, which limits the generalizability to families of other races/ethnicities.
- The authors did not provide comparison groups for parental stress levels and child disruptive behavior, which makes it difficult to determine how normative the levels of stress and child disruptive behavior were in this sample.
- Participants were self-selected through the online IAN network; these families could be very different from families not enrolled in this network, but no data were provided regarding these potential differences.
- Despite the focus on effective parenting strategies as a central topic, little description or definition was given for the term, which limits application.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine levels of parental stress in parents of children with ASD compared to various other parent groups
- Continue to examine parenting strategies with a more diverse sample, using multiple informants and/or direct observation to collect data
- Examine which factors contribute to an effective parenting program for parents of children with ASD

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>