

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

How Physicians Support Children With Disabilities and Their Families: Roles, Responsibilities and Collaborative Partnerships

Sheppard, M. E., & Vitalone-Raccaro, N. (2016). How physicians support children with disabilities and their families: Roles, responsibilities and collaborative partnerships. *Disability and Health Journal*, 9(4), 692-704.
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SUMMARY: Collaboration between schools, families, and physicians is thought to result in better care and outcomes for children with disabilities; however, several barriers prevent physicians from providing collaborative care. Physicians reported about their experiences working with families of children with disabilities, and common themes were identified. Barriers, including time, resources, education, knowledge, and workload may make it difficult for physicians to provide high-quality, collaborative care.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Primary physician responsibilities in working with children with disabilities were to diagnose, treat, refer to services, collaborate with parents and schools, make recommendations, and interpret education reports.
- Barriers to collaborative care included physicians' limited time and hospital resources, parents' lack of knowledge and resources, and schools' inability to or disinterest in collaborating.
- The majority of physicians had moderate knowledge of disabilities and special education laws and practices, but almost all reported no formal education regarding these topics.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Develop educational materials (e.g., handouts, online modules) for medical personnel who work with military families to learn about children with disabilities and special education plans
- Facilitate support groups for parents with children with disabilities who are navigating getting and coordinating resources for their children across school, medical, and community settings

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide courses for military parents with children with disabilities about special education resources
- Make case workers available to military parents with children with disabilities to help coordinate child resources and care, advocate for families, and educate families about disability laws

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend military medical personnel take courses about working with children with disabilities and their families, including how to help coordinate services
- Encourage collaboration between school staff and physicians treating children with disabilities

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METHODS

- Physicians were recruited via phone and email, and researchers non-randomly selected participants to obtain a representative and informative sample.
- Physicians completed interviews regarding their experiences of working with children with disabilities and their families and collaborating with schools and special education programs.
- Participant statements were coded for themes, and inter-rater reliability was examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 13 physicians from who had worked with children with disabilities and their families.
- Physicians were 77% male and worked in either urban (31%), suburban (62%), or rural (8%) settings, which included hospitals (38%), clinics (15%), and private practices (46%).
- Physicians specialized in developmental pediatrics (46%), general pediatrics (38%), neurology (8%), and rehabilitation pediatrics (8%); no race or ethnicity data were provided.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants were non-randomly selected by researchers, introducing possible researcher bias.
- Results were based on physician self-report, and physicians may have tried to respond in the most socially desirable way.
- Physicians' knowledge of disabilities and special education was inferred by researchers rather than asked directly, potentially skewing data or missing relevant responses.
- Results from a small, non-random sample from one geographical area may not be generalizable.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine whether teaching physicians about children with disabilities and special education plans during medical school increases physicians' school collaboration
- Investigate the role of parent involvement and advocacy in military families on getting special education plans and other resources for their children with disabilities
- Explore school staff and administrations' willingness to collaborate with physicians about children with disabilities, including reasons for resistance to collaboration

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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