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Family Practice Based Interventions to Reduce Stress in Parents of Children with Autism

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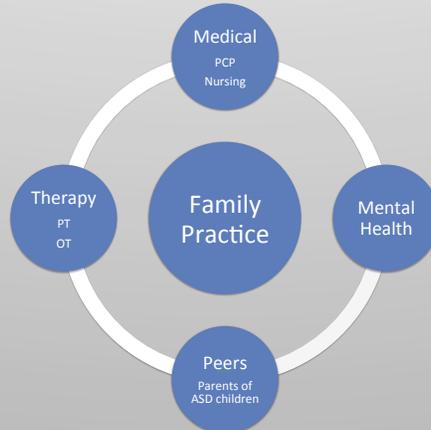


Abstract

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a group of neurodevelopmental disorders typically diagnosed before the age of three that affect the child's behavior, communication and social skills. Although a pediatric neuropsychologist often confirms a diagnosis of this disorder, the primary care provider is highly involved in the ongoing care of the autistic child. It is well researched that parenting a child with ASD is correlated with high levels of stress, anxiety and depression, and it is not uncommon for the parent of a child with ASD to be a patient of the family practice as well. While the current interventions for the child with ASD vastly improve the child's lifetime outcomes, there are few programs in place beyond "support group" to address the specific mental health needs of the parent caring for a child with ASD. This research asks how a family-practice-based peer support group with rotations of primary care providers, nursing staff, occupational/physical therapists, and mental health counselors compared to standard ASD intervention alone affects the stress experienced by parents of children with autism over a one year period. A literature search of PubMed, The Cochrane Library, Scopus, Eric and PsychINFO using the terms primary care, family practice, pediatric care, autism, autism spectrum disorder, stress, parental stress and support yielded a high number of articles that was narrowed to 13 current, relevant articles, 6 of which were kept for a literature review. The outcomes of these studies were reviewed, compared and summarized, and it was concluded that although the interventions examined in the literature varied in modality, length and setting, there was sufficient evidence to suggest that the above mentioned intervention would result in decreased stress in parents of children with ASD. Further research is needed to determine how best to determine which modes of intervention are most appropriate for specific stressful triggers.

Research Question

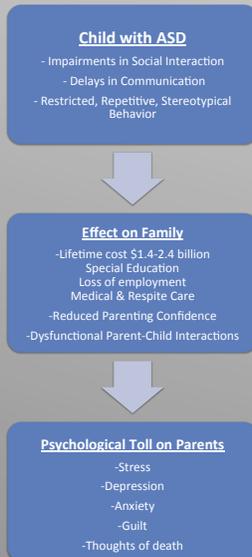
Among parents of children aged 2-18 diagnosed with ASD, how does a family-practice-based peer support group with rotations of primary care providers, nursing staff, occupational/physical therapists, and mental health counselors compared to standard ASD intervention alone affect the stress experienced by parents of children with autism over a one year period?



Discussion

- Parents have individual needs in dealing with the stress of parenting a child with ASD.
- Personalization and multiple modalities of support are beneficial in reducing parental stress and increasing overall well-being in the setting of parenting a child with ASD.
- A family practice in which the parent and child are both patients of the same provider or team of providers is an ideal setting to implement a support group.
- There is sufficient evidence to suggest that a family-practice-based peer support/education group with rotations of medical providers, mental health providers and therapists may reduce stress in parents of children with ASD.
- Future research indicated in the most beneficial types of interventions and the best way to integrate this care into standard medical practice.

Background



Results

Type of Study	Intervention	Outcomes
RCT	Peer lead mindfulness based treatments and positive adult psychology treatments.	Decrease in parental stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia.
RCT	Cognitive behavioral intervention focused on problem solving education from multidisciplinary providers.	Decrease in parental stress and depression.
Quasi-Experimental	ASD specific primary care medical home provided by pediatrician, nurse coordinator, scheduling coordinator.	Increased parental satisfaction with multi-disciplinary, focused care. No specific results regarding parental stress.
Descriptive	No intervention	Inverse relationship between maternal self-efficacy and parental stress; Stressed parents more likely to meet depression criteria.
Systematic Review	Parents of children with ASD trained as Early Interventionists. EI performed in group setting	Positive change in parent-child interaction and language; inconclusive on parental stress.
RCT	Psychologist in primary care setting using individualized program for four variable length sessions.	Improved dysfunctional interactions; No effect on parental stress levels

Key Aspects of Group

- Multi-Modal
- Personalized
- Parental ASD Education
- Peer Support and networking
- Psychological Support & Education: Mindfulness, Adult Psychology, Problem Solving, etc.
- Early Intervention/Early Access
- On site child care

Primary Care Provider Role

- Use of quantifiable & reproducible measurement tools of stress, depression and anxiety
- Identification of parental stressors
- Education on stress reduction techniques
- Encouragement of group attendance
- Continued support for Early Intervention treatments in patients

Barriers

- Financial: staff compensation
- Insurance coverage
- Time commitment
- Access
- Children with ASD already have multiple providers & interventionists