Family Practice Based Interventions to Reduce Stress in Parents

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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 overall outcomes, there are few programs in place beyond “support group” to address the specific mental health needs of the parents caring for a child with ASD. This research also looks at 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 Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), 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 were 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.

Background

Child with ASD
- Impairments in Social Interaction
- Delays in Communication
- Restricted, Repetitive, Stereotypical Behaviors

Effect on Family
- lifetime cost $1.4-2.4 Billion
- Medical & Respite Care
- Loss of employment
- Reduced Parenting Confidence
- Dysfunctional Parent-Child Interactions

Psychological Toll on Parents
- Stress
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Thoughts of death

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?

Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Study</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Peer-led telehealth based treatments and positive adult psychology trainings</td>
<td>Decrease in parental stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Early Intervention/Early Access</td>
<td>Decrease in parental stress and depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quasi-Experimental</td>
<td>Early childhood medical home model based on problem solving education from multidisciplinary providers</td>
<td>Improved parental collaboration with multidisciplinary, focused care; no specific results regarding parental stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Description of children with ASD treated as Early Intervention</td>
<td>Improved results in parents with ASD children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic Review</td>
<td>Systematic review of children with ASD treated as Early Intervention</td>
<td>Improved results in parental stress reduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Pilot study in primary care setting using an individualized program for four variable length sessions</td>
<td>Improved dysfunctional interactions; no effect on parental stress levels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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 & interventions