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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 quality of life, there are few programs in place beyond “support groups” to address the specific mental health needs of the parents 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.

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/lead institutions based treatments and positive adult psychology treatments.</td>
<td>Decrease in parental stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Early intervention programs based on problem solving education from multidisciplinary providers.</td>
<td>Decrease in parent stress and depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quasi-experimental</td>
<td>Peer/lead in a primary care medical home provided by pediatric, nurse coordinator, scheduling coordinator</td>
<td>Improved parent collaboration with multidisciplinary, focused care. No specific results regarding parental stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>No intervention</td>
<td>Increase in stressful times and decreased self-efficiency and parental stress. Improved parental stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic Review</td>
<td>Peers of children with ASD trained as early interventionists, EI performed in group setting.</td>
<td>Improvement in parent-child interaction and language, improvement on parental stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Parenting in primary care setting using interdisciplinary 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 & interventionists