

# Military spouses say needs for children with autism unmet

February 8 2016, by Jennifer Miller

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The majority of U.S. military spouses say the needs for their children with autism are unmet, according to a Penn State study.

All of the military spouses who participated in the study reported having at least one incident of a need for intervention or service going unmet

for their oldest child with [autism](#).

The most common unmet need reported was social skills therapy at 88 percent, followed by behavioral management intervention, speech-language therapy and physical or occupational therapy.

Some of the participants have more than one child with autism. Spouses were connected to all U.S. military branches.

The study, led by Communication and Sciences Disorders doctoral student Jennifer Davis, offers a rare glimpse at the challenges [military families](#) face while raising at least one child with autism. Little peer-reviewed research has been conducted in this area.

Military families are especially vulnerable to parenting challenges due to frequent [relocation](#). When military families have children with autism, relocation can have a compounded effect, according to researchers.

Part of the challenge is acclimating to environmental changes, which can be particularly difficult for children with autism. Relocation can also interrupt and hinder access to necessary services and intervention programs.

The 189 families in the sample reported relocating between two and 11 times since the birth of their oldest child with autism.

Most military spouses reported problems accessing the services they felt their child with autism needed. Specifically:

78 percent reported delayed access to intervention services as a result of relocation.

Nearly 70 percent of respondents reported feeling the continuity of

services between locations to be lacking.

Roughly 57 percent were dissatisfied with the frequency of interventions and services following relocation.

Additionally, 58 percent of military spouses reported difficulty finding doctors or other medical professionals who were trained to treat their child's disability.

"These families face a lot of challenges at once and experience relocation every two to three years," Davis said. "Science shows that consistency in intervention and educational services is effective and important for children with autism and such consistency appears compromised currently for military families, according to our findings."

Davis also noted that 15 military spouses did not list any family needs, therefore, services in some locations may be adequate for some families.

To address the gap, researchers suggest establishing new programs while improving existing programs to help eliminate some barriers military families face. As part of a solution, researchers suggest telehealth interventions, which have the potential to increase availability and accessibility of services.

In response to the findings, Davis is developing a mentoring program to link military spouses with children with autism and varying levels of relocation experience. This will create a support system for families that may improve their experiences with relocating.

The results of the study were published in the January online edition of the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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