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RESEARCH REVIEW | ISSUE 257

Exploring the Advocacy Experiences of Military Families with Children Who Have Disabilities

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ABSTRACT:

"When children with disabilities receive appropriate services, they experience long-term developmental benefits. Yet, military families of children with disabilities in the United States report lacking access to needed services and having difficulty navigating service delivery systems. Unlike civilian families, military families face added stressors such as deployment and relocation. Parent advocacy may be critical for military families of children with disabilities to access needed services. However, little research has explored advocacy among military families. The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the advocacy experiences of military families of children with disabilities. Using a snowballing sampling, we conducted individual interviews with 11 military parents of children with disabilities from five states. Participants reported unique military experiences (e.g., satisfaction with the coverage of their healthcare program but had difficulty navigating healthcare policies), barriers to advocacy (e.g., limited school resources), and facilitators to advocacy (e.g., perseverance and resilience). Based on the findings, implications for practice and research are discussed."

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- The 11 parents interviewed (10 military spouses, 1 service member) were recruited using snowball sampling through military and disability agencies to investigate the experiences of military parents of children with disabilities. The average age of the children was 15.94 years, ranging from 9 to 29 years old.
- The study revealed varying experiences within the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP), including both positive aspects and challenges. It also highlighted military families' resilience and self-reliance, with independent advocacy during spousal deployment. Participants also highlighted their reliance on fellow families of children with disabilities, using online support groups and webinars for guidance, as well as leaning on friends for healthcare access.
- The study also revealed the importance of military mothers throughout the advocacy process and how even with their own military obligations, they remain the primary advocates for their children. However, participants reported that, in some cases, their advocacy was only effective when their military husband attended Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Professionals working with military families of children with disabilities should leverage the strengths within the military family ecosystem and recognize the innate resilience, perseverance, and resourcefulness of military families due to their unique experiences. To that end, practitioners should develop advocacy training programs that harness and amplify these qualities to empower families in their advocacy efforts. Professionals should also encourage the active involvement of military fathers in the advocacy process, particularly in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. This study suggests that the presence of military fathers, especially when dressed in uniform, proved to be an effective strategy for securing disability services and should be promoted as a valuable advocacy approach. Lastly, professionals should think about developing specialized support and training programs that consider the military challenges posed by frequent relocations. These programs should equip military families with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complex advocacy landscape, fostering more effective and informed advocacy efforts.

FOR POLICY

The findings from this study suggest several policy recommendations to support military families of children with disabilities. Given the likelihood of multiple relocations, emphasizing federal policies in special education can help families transition smoothly between states, while gradually adapting to state-specific regulations. Additionally, providing information about military-specific programs, such as EFMP and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, can be valuable for military families. In terms of broader policies, these findings shed light on the need for improvements in EFMP and Tricare support. Aligning with prior research, this study highlights that the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) may fall short in adequately assisting military families with disabled children. Policymakers should engage with these families to gather insights for policy changes, aiming to simplify program navigation, enhance consistency across states, and offer comprehensive training and information. Notably, a promising initiative in Navy Region Mid-Atlantic and Navy Region Southwest offers legal assistance and special education support to EFMP-enrolled families, serving as a potential model for enhancing support programs (U.S. Navy Office of Information, 2020). These insights can guide policymakers in shaping more effective and supportive policies for military families of children with disabilities.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research highlights unique challenges faced by military spouses who often find it challenging to communicate with their deployed partners regarding advocacy issues. Moreover, the study revealed that military mothers, even with their own military obligations, remain the primary advocates for their children. This points to the need for further research that delves into the intersection of advocacy, gender dynamics, and the specific stressors experienced by military mothers, which can inform more targeted support and policies to alleviate their burdens and improve the advocacy experience. Understanding power dynamics and privilege within Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings is crucial. Researchers should examine how gender discrimination and the military's influence affect advocacy outcomes. Additionally, longitudinal studies are warranted to shed light on how advocacy evolves over time for military families of children with disabilities, considering the impact of relocations and deployments, and identifying optimal points for intervention. Further research should explore patterns related to child characteristics and parent advocacy, examining variations in advocacy within families dealing with maladaptive behaviors, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), varying support needs, and the influence of a child's age on parent advocacy within military families. These research avenues will provide valuable insights for tailored support and policies to enhance the advocacy experience for military families.

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