

Navigating unique challenges and experiences: A systematic review of the psychological health and wellbeing in military families with children who have autism

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Background

- Military families manage **unique stressors that aren't experienced by civilian families**.
- Military families with dependents who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND¹) have been identified as an **overlooked sub-population within military health research**.²
- Whilst there is a wealth of research on civilian families raising children with autism, there is a **paucity of research on families who are part of both the military and autism communities**.

Aims

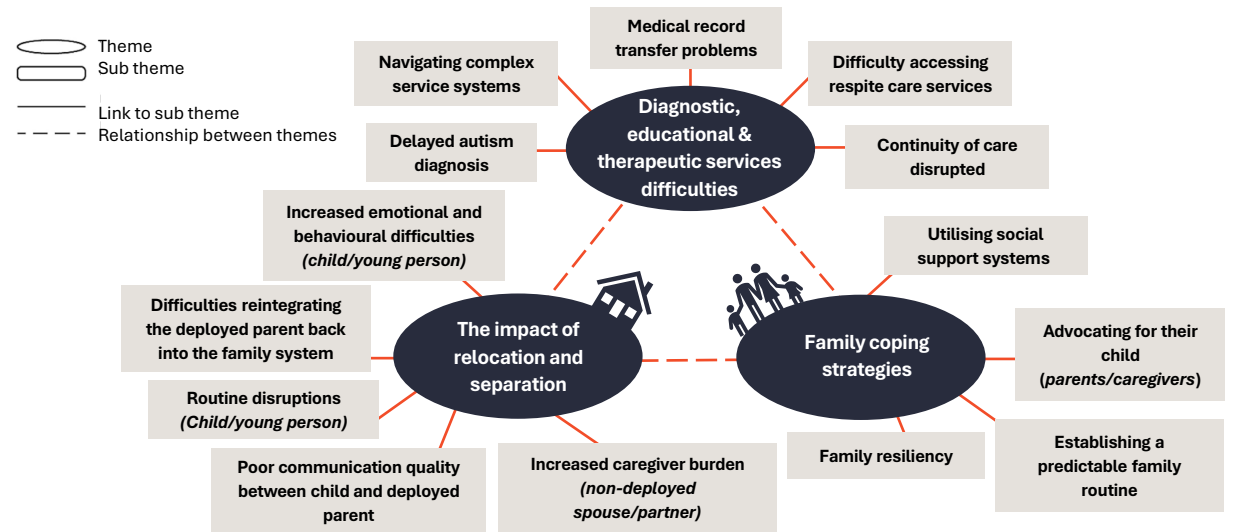
To synthesise the literature on families who are part of both the military and autism communities.

Method

- Electronic database searches were conducted in July 2023 to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles using PRISMA³ guidelines.
- Grey literature and charity reports were sought through manually searching bibliographies and Google Scholar.
- A thematic analysis⁴ identified common themes within the literature.
- Qualitative studies were analysed via meta-synthesis and quantitative studies were summarised through narrative synthesis.

Results: Thematic analysis

14 studies met inclusion criteria (n = 11 qualitative, n = 3 quantitative). Results from the thematic analysis⁴ clustered into **three themes**. Data synthesis suggested family members mental health and wellbeing may be impacted by the cumulative stressors associated with military life and managing their child's autism.



Conclusion

The combination of military and autism-related stressors can lead to **idiosyncratic challenges** and experiences for families which may **result in adverse mental health and wellbeing outcomes**. For example, securing appropriate and consistent additional school support can be difficult to sustain alongside frequent military relocations. **More research** is needed to understand this relationship, so that services can respond appropriately to **ensure that military children's autism diagnosis, medical record transfer, and specialised health and educational support are not impacted by military connected relocation and separations**.

References

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