Title:
Early Intervention Service Use Among Children with Developmental Disabilities During a Pandemic

Author:
Kwok, Jackson BS, Winston, Sherry MS, Gerdes, Marsha PhD, Morales, Knashawn ScD, McQuaid, Ellen MPH, Guevara, James MD MPH

Background:
Low-income families of children with developmental disabilities require support from Early Intervention (EI) services. Mitigation strategies associated with the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the delivery of EI services.

Objective:
To determine changes in access to and use of EI services pre- and post-pandemic among children under 3 years of age in Philadelphia.

Design/Methods:
This project recruited from an ongoing trial testing the effectiveness of patient navigation among families of children less than 3 with developmental delays who were referred for EI services. Families completed online surveys that asked whether children had completed EI referrals and received services pre- and post-pandemic lockdown (March 16th, 2020) in Philadelphia. We assessed for differences in referral completion and service use pre- and post-pandemic. A subset of parents who completed surveys was purposively sampled to complete semi-structured telephone interviews. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for thematic content.

Results:
Among 98 participants who were enrolled in the study, 93 completed the survey. Of these, 61 (66%) had completed referrals for EI, and 48 (52%) had received EI services. These families were predominantly African-American (69%) or Hispanic (10%) with incomes below $55,000 (81%). Of those who completed referrals, a majority (43 or 70%) completed referrals before the pandemic, 14 (23%) after the pandemic started, and 4 (7%) did not specify. Among families receiving EI services, 41 of 43 (95%) reported receiving EI services before the pandemic, while only 19 of 48 (41%) received EI services after the pandemic began (p=0.005). Families perceived post-pandemic virtual EI services to be less effective than in-person visits, with decreased engagement or cooperation between their children and the provider when meeting a virtual setting.

Conclusions:
There was a significant decline in the use of EI services following pandemic mitigation strategies. Future study should investigate how virtual services can be better appreciated and engaging for families.