

Measuring the service system impact of a novel telediagnostic service program for young children with autism spectrum disorder

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Although Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is very common, it is hard for many families to reach diagnostic experts when their young children show symptoms of ASD. This is because these experts tend to practice in specialty clinics in urban areas and have very long waitlists for appointments. The current work builds on a previous study in which we found telemedicine visits can increase families' access to specialists and accurately diagnose many young children with ASD in their home communities. For these telemedicine visits we used videoconferencing technology to connect a psychologist in one part of the state with a family and on-site service provider in another part of the state. This was in order to complete a parent interview and observe the implementation of an ASD screening tool. Because these telemedicine visits happened closer to people's homes within a rural region, we wanted to know if having this option changed the behavior of the referring providers, namely, the state early intervention system. We examined whether giving families and referring providers the option for a telemedicine visit changed how many families were referred to the service versus how many were referred to the traditional specialty diagnostic center, located in a major metropolitan area approximately 140 miles away. We also examined whether families were more likely to choose one option or another, what factors influenced their choice, the time a family waited for a visit, and whether or not they attended their appointments. We then compared findings to data from a comparable rural region in another part of the state. Results indicated that offering telemedicine in an underserved area can streamline how families are referred for ASD evaluation and positively impact their abilities to access diagnostic care more quickly.