

Today's military children and families experience unique hardships. They move around the country and the world repeatedly, and they must therefore adjust to new living environments, schools, and peer groups much more often than other children and families do. They live through repeated cycles of stressful separation and reunion. And they must cope with the possibility, and sometimes the reality, that a parent will die in combat or come home with serious and permanent health problems and disabilities.

Much of the research about military children examines these and other stressful experiences, or the difficulties that these sources of stress purportedly cause (for example, poor academic performance, depression, or behavioral problems). Though we certainly need to understand military life's negative effects on children, such research tells neither the complete story nor what is perhaps the more important story. In large part, researchers have yet to examine military children's strengths, how these strengths can sustain them through adversity, or how their own strengths interact and develop with the strengths of their military families and the communities where they live. Moreover, we have yet to fully identify and assess the resources for positive development that exist in these children's schools, in the military, and in their civilian communities. In short, the existing research offers only a rudimentary depiction of military children and their families across their respective life courses, and certainly not a representative one.

Given the extraordinary sacrifices that military personnel make, the children of military families deserve to have policies and programs designed to fit their developmental needs. The articles in this issue of *Future of Children* expand our knowledge and illuminate a path toward a more representative depiction of military children and their families. In this way, they not only summarize the evidence we need to enhance existing policies and programs that ameliorate risk and promote positive development among military children; they also offer a critical guide for new research to support future innovations in policies and programs.

Themes of the issue

- *Military children are resilient.* Despite the challenges of military life, most military children turn out just fine; in other words, they are resilient in the face of adversity. Resilience is a product of the relationships between children and the people and resources around them. In this sense, military life, along with its hardships, offers many sources of resilience—for example, a strong sense of belonging to a supportive community with a shared mission and values.
- *Military children are everywhere, but they are not always visible.* Military children and families don't always live on or near installations. With the broad mobilization of Guard and Reserve forces during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, children in almost every community

in the nation have seen a parent deployed to war. Even when they are near an installation, and especially when they are far away from one, schools, community organizations and others often don't know who among the children they serve is a military-connected child and who is not.

- *Military children can help us understand all children, and vice versa.* Military children are children first. They pass through the same developmental stages as other children do, and there are many parallels in the lives of military and civilian children and families. Thus, the struggles and achievements of military children and families, and the successes and failures of programs designed to support them, hold valuable lessons for all of us.
- *We need better research about military children and families.* For instance, we need more long-term research that follows military children from birth to adulthood, through the many transitions in their lives, so that we can say definitively what is normal development among military children and learn more about their strengths, resilience, and social support networks.

Policy Implications

The contributors to this issue of the *Future of Children* suggest several ideas that policy makers should consider to make their efforts to help military children more effective.

- *Base programs for military children on sound evidence.* We owe military children and families the best programs that science and practice can design and deliver; therefore, we need to learn the principles of best practice. Many current programs for military children were rolled out quickly, at a time of pressing need, but few are based on scientific evidence of what works, and even fewer have been rigorously evaluated for their effectiveness.
- *Center programs for military children on resilience.* Although we should certainly try to reduce the risks that military children face, the best way to help these children is to build on the strengths that they, their families, and their communities already possess.
- *Break down barriers among services for military children.* Military family status, for example, could be routinely flagged in children's health and educational records, so that awareness of their needs follows them wherever they go.
- *Be ready for the future.* If we begin to prepare now, then the next time the United States engages in armed conflict, we can more quickly and efficiently provide military children and families the kinds of support they both need and deserve, proactively rather than reactively.



The Future of Children is a collaboration of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution. For more information on *The Future of Children* please visit: www.futureofchildren.org.