

Military Children and Families: Introducing the Issue

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In this issue of *The Future of Children*, we seek to integrate existing knowledge about the children and families of today's United States military; to identify what we know (and don't know) about their strengths and the challenges they face, as well as the programs that serve them; to specify directions for future research; and to illuminate the evidence (or lack thereof) behind current and future policies and programs that serve these children and families. At the same time, we highlight how research on nonmilitary children and families can help us understand their military-connected counterparts and, in turn, how research on military children can contribute both to a general understanding of human development and to our knowledge of other populations of American children.

These goals are timely and important. Since the war in Afghanistan began in 2001, followed in 2002 by the war in Iraq, the United

States has seen the largest sustained deployment of military servicemen and service-women in the history of the all-volunteer force. As a result, more than two million military children have been separated from their service member parents, both fathers and mothers, because of combat deployments. Many families have seen multiple deployments—three, four, even five or more family separations and reunifications. Others have struggled with combat-related mental health problems, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); physical injuries, including traumatic brain injury (TBI); and death, all of which can affect children and families for years.¹

Media reports about the wars and human interest stories about combat veterans and their families have made most Americans more aware of the challenges that military families and children have faced over the past decade. The history of military children,

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however, goes back much further in time and tells a complex story of the interrelationship among these children, their military parents and families, and the military and civilian communities in which they live. Though these children face many hardships, they also demonstrate health and wellness in many ways, and they live in communities with rich traditions and resources that strive to support them.

The terms *military child* and *military family* have been used in various ways. President Barack Obama and the Joint Chiefs of Staff define military families as active-duty service members, members of the National Guard and Reserve, and veterans, plus the members of their immediate and extended families, as well as the families of those who lost their lives in service to their country.² However, researchers who study and collect data on military families and children typically define military families as the spouses and dependent children (age 22 and younger) of men and women on active duty or in the National Guard and Reserve. This is the definition we use here, although we broaden it to include the children of military veterans because the experience of military family life may continue to affect the growth and health of parents, families, and children long after service members leave the armed forces. Though we recognize that military service also affects parents, siblings, and other relatives of service members, our authors do not discuss these relatives in any detail, reflecting a paucity of research in this area. In addition, what becomes of military children when they reach adulthood, including their own greater propensity to volunteer for military service, is also of great interest and worthy of future research, but it is outside the scope of this issue.

The articles here present considerable evidence about America's military-connected children and their families, but the authors also point to the limits of our knowledge. At this writing, in the second decade of the 21st century, we still need unbiased, basic information about what typically characterizes children's development in our diverse military-connected families. Research on the development of military children has focused largely on the quality or function of their family systems and on the potential risks of a parent's deployment to their wellbeing, but we need to understand more about the strengths and resilience of these young people, particularly as they face challenging circumstances. A few studies describe how a parent's PTSD affects children, but we know very little about the effect on children of combat-related injuries (including TBI) and death, and we must extrapolate from the civilian literature in those areas; we need longitudinal studies (research that follows children and family members across time) that examine military children in these circumstances. The knowledge we have is sufficient neither to guide our understanding of military children's resilience nor to help us design better programs to mitigate the risks they face.

Much of the research about military children examines stressful experiences (for example, a parent's deployment, moving, or maltreatment and abuse) or the deficits that these stress factors purportedly cause (for example, poor academic performance, depression, or behavioral problems).³ Though we need to understand any negative effects of military life on children, the data from such research tell 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.

The children of military families deserve to have policies and programs designed to fit their developmental needs. Given the extraordinary sacrifices that military personnel make, and the invaluable services that they provide, our lack of a thorough understanding of their children's development is not appropriate. A balanced approach to the study and understanding of military children—one that measures the effect of risks but also incorporates a focus on strengths—will give us the clearest and most comprehensive picture of this population, for several reasons:

1. Research that focuses on the broader impact of stressful or traumatic events on children describes a wide range of responses, including not only anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, risky behaviors, and even PTSD, but also positive adaptation and growth. The severity of the stress, the proximity of the experience, the children's age and gender, their history of exposure to other traumatic experiences, their parents' or caregivers' functional capacity, and the availability of social supports all typically contribute to the outcome. Understanding specific risks and the disorders or dysfunction they can produce lets us more effectively target prevention and intervention strategies that promote health.

2. Most children exposed to traumatic events are likely to be healthy rather than ill. Therefore, preventive interventions that support health through adversity by imparting resources, skills, and broad resilience-building strategies may benefit not only military children but a larger segment of the population as well, and may help us develop community capacity to manage a broad range of challenging experiences throughout all children's lives.

3. Self-efficacy—the capacity to feel in control of one's own development—is a critical skill that helps both individuals and communities recover and thrive when they face adversity and traumatic experiences. Therefore, to support military children and their families, we must understand how to foster individual, family, and community capacity for self-efficacy.

4. Enhancing the lives of children in military families also enhances the quality of their families' lives. Research documents a positive relationship between the wellbeing of the families of military personnel and the likelihood that they will stay in the service. Given the nation's continual need for high-quality service members, it is in the public interest to ensure that military children and families are thriving.

5. Without precise knowledge of military children's strengths and their opportunities for positive development, conjecture and overgeneralization will inappropriately frame decisions about meeting their needs and supporting their health, and we cannot have confidence that we are using practices, formulating policies, and developing or sustaining programs based on the best information we can obtain. Decisions about ameliorating the inherent risks of military

life to help children grow and thrive need to be based on evidence derived from well-designed, theoretically predicated developmental research.

6. Given the current state of research on military children, we cannot adequately describe how they may be using their strengths and resources to cope with either the typical opportunities and challenges shared by all children or the unique opportunities and challenges of military family life. In addition, we need to know more about the life course of the hundreds of thousands of children with parents who have been wounded or profoundly changed as a result of a combat injury or PTSD, and about the development of children who have experienced the combat-related death of a military parent, sibling, or family member.

Noting the interconnections among service members, families, and child health and functioning, and how these interconnections influence child development, we support a theoretical approach that incorporates a life-course perspective. We know little about the “linked lives” within military families.⁴ That is, we need to understand the mutually influential connections between the development of children and the development of their parents, both during the parents’ periods of service and in the later periods of the life course. Finally, the links between the lives of children and parents—as they experience events such as moving, changing schools, deployment, reintegration, or a parent’s traumatic injury, illness, or death—have yet to be thoroughly elucidated. As the articles in this issue show, a life-course perspective provides a vital and unifying theoretical approach to describe how military children develop.

Accordingly, in this issue we use a life-course perspective to review data about how contemporary military families and their children develop. This perspective is predicated on the idea that human lives are interdependent and “socially embedded in specific historical times and places that shape their content, pattern, and direction.”⁵ As a consequence, the life course involves interconnections among people’s life paths as they live in their families, work, grow older, move, experience historic events like war, and face life events that are both ordinary (such as puberty, or starting and finishing the school years) and extraordinary (such as a parent’s injury or death). In response to the settings, transitions, and events in their lives, writes Glen H. Elder Jr., “individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the constraints and opportunities of history and social circumstances.”⁶

Of course, we need good science to produce such knowledge about military children, knowledge that will let us better take care of their health and support their development through effective individual, family, and community prevention and intervention strategies. Most studies of military children have been limited by using small convenience samples—that is, groups of people who are easily accessible and available to the researchers, but who are not representative of the broader population—or by focusing on children’s deficits rather than their strengths. We need an approach that moves beyond these children’s purported deficits, and that recognizes and examines the broad impacts of both challenges as well as strengths in military children, families, and communities. Although the interactions of risk and health-promoting forces within military families and communities are complex, existing

longitudinal research demonstrates that we can study such dynamic interactions using larger, representative samples.⁷

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The articles in this issue 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. Next, we provide an overview of the contributions to this issue and their implications, for military children and families as well as for all families.

The Demographics of Military Children and Families

Molly Clever and David R. Segal, both of the University of Maryland, find that, despite some general themes, our military families are strikingly diverse, by age, race, ethnicity,

and cultural background. Thus, they write, our nation needs programs and policies that are flexible enough to adapt to the diversity of military families and to their continual transformations. They also note several areas where we need more and better demographic research: infants and toddlers in military families; reactions to frequent moves, including their effects on education; military families (such as those of Guard and Reserve members) who do not live in communities with a large military presence; and integrating knowledge about military families and veteran families.

Economic Conditions of Military Families

James Hosek of the RAND Corporation and Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth of Purdue University report that the economic circumstances of military families have improved considerably in the past decade as military salaries have risen. But military spouses face a range of economic difficulties. Their wages are lower than those of their civilian counterparts, they are less likely to find work or to work full time, and their job tenure is disrupted by frequent moves. Moreover, precisely because service members' salaries are now typically higher than those of their civilian counterparts, military families are likely to see their income fall when they leave the armed forces.

Military Children from Birth to Five Years

Joy D. Osofsky of the Louisiana State University School of Medicine in New Orleans and Lieutenant Colonel Molinda M. Chartrand of the U.S. Air Force note that we know very little about how the stresses of military life affect the very young, even though they are the most numerous and

perhaps most vulnerable children in military families. Accordingly, the authors make inferences from research in other contexts, and they conclude that an emotionally available and supportive caregiver is the key to building resilience in young children who face stressful situations. This suggests that support for the youngest military children means, above all, helping their parents and other caregivers cope with the stress in their lives.

Child Care and Other Support Programs

Major Latosha Floyd of the U.S. Army and Deborah A. Phillips of Georgetown University observe that the U.S. Department of Defense deservedly receives wide acclaim for offering accessible, affordable, high-quality child care—which the military sees as an essential element of combat readiness and effectiveness—to service members and their families. They also discuss how the military is coping with the challenge of providing child care to families who face multiple deployments, and to the growing share of military families who live in civilian communities. Finally, they argue that the military's experience with revamping its child-care system could be used as a template to improve child care for the nation as a whole.

Resilience among Military Youth

M. Ann Easterbrooks of Tufts University, Kenneth Ginsburg of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and Richard M. Lerner, also of Tufts, present an approach to understanding resilience among military-connected young people that is based on sound theory, and they discuss gaps in our current knowledge. The research to date, they find, suggests that to bolster resilience among military children and their parents, we should advocate for enhancing the available social

support resources. However, they conclude that although many military and civilian programs aimed at promoting resilience are promising, we still know far too little about how children in military families become resilient and thrive.

How Wartime Military Service Affects Children and Families

Patricia Lester of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Major Eric Flake of the U.S. Air Force use developmental theory and research as the foundation to understand how children experience wartime deployments, paying particular attention to risk and resilience. Their goal is to provide a framework that can help guide a national research agenda and develop a public health approach for military-connected children and their families, at the same time that it offers insights about civilian children affected by other types of adversity. They conclude that a successful national public-health response for military-connected children and families requires policies that help military and civilian researchers—as well as communities and systems of care—communicate, connect, and collaborate with one another.

When a Parent Is Injured or Killed in Combat

Allison Holmes of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), Paula Rauch of Harvard University, and Colonel Stephen J. Cozza, also of USUHS, examine how children are affected when a parent is injured (physically or psychologically) or dies during a combat deployment. Where there are gaps in the research on the modern military, the authors present data from studies of civilian life or past conflicts that can help us understand what military-connected children are likely to experience.

They conclude that we can help children cope and thrive by supporting parents' physical and mental health, bolstering their parenting capacity, and enhancing family organization. Throughout the family's recovery, they write, the most effective community support services and resources are those that emphasize family-focused care and resilience.

Building Communities of Care for Military Children and Families

Harold Kudler of Duke University and Colonel Rebecca I. Porter of the U.S. Army define communities of care as complex systems that work across individual, parent/child, family, community, military, national, and even international levels of organization to promote the health and development of military children. They note that relatively few elements of these communities are clinical, while others support military children (or, at least, minimize their vulnerabilities) through interaction with parents, schools, youth organizations, law enforcement and judicial systems, educational and vocational programs, and veterans' organizations, among others. The authors argue that researchers, practitioners, and policy makers need to recognize the presence of military children in our communities and tackle their problems in close proximity to their homes, schools, community organizations, and doctor's offices. The secret of creating communities of care for military children, they contend, is creating communities that care about military children.

Unlocking Insights about Military Children and Families

Anita Chandra of the RAND Corporation and Andrew S. London of Syracuse University discuss how we could help close the gaps in our knowledge about military

children and families by collecting more and better data. They recommend that researchers routinely include questions about parental military experience in existing and future national surveys. They also suggest making use of smaller-scale studies to adapt survey questions for military populations, reformulate research questions, and examine the effects of unique military circumstances on children's health, behavior, and emotions. In addition, they call for longitudinal research that follows military, veteran, and civilian children into adulthood to enhance our understanding of how military service affects development across the life-span.

Afterword: What We Can Learn from Military Children and Families

Drawing from the preceding articles, Ann S. Masten of the University of Minnesota highlights what we can learn from military children and families that can be applied to families outside the military. She concludes that a system of solutions to promote family and child resilience and healthy development is emerging in the military, and that it heralds a fundamental transformation in thinking and practices with respect to sustaining military preparedness and excellence. She argues that what works to promote children's success and protect child development in military families may have profound significance for the future of all American children.

Conclusions

Framed by a life-course perspective that focuses on the linked lives of military children, their families, and the military and civilian communities in which they live, this issue of *The Future of Children* advances our understanding of the developmental

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processes and community supports that can lead to positive (or negative) outcomes among military youth in all their diversity. The articles show how studying the life course of children and families in general can reveal the processes of individual development and parent-child relations in military families as they experience both ordinary and extraordinary life and historical events. In turn, we see how the resilience and strengths of military children, families, and communities exemplify processes pertinent to the linked lives of children and families in general. Together, the articles in this issue offer a framework both to enhance research and to understand the unique risks and strengths of military children and their families, and they point to the need to further develop evidence-based policies and programs that can capitalize on military children's strengths and better promote their positive development through challenging times.

ENDNOTES

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