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Exploring the Role of Social Connectedness among Military Youth: Perceptions from Youth, Parents, and School Personnel

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KEYWORDS: Adolescents, social connectedness, military families, mobility, parent deployment

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- This study focused on identifying the main stressors affecting adolescents with a parent in the military, exploring the role of social connectedness among military families and examining potential coping strategies for the challenges of military family life.
- Researchers found that the major stressors for military youth included having to move frequently and make new friends, experiencing parental deployment and adjustment challenges associated with a deployed parent's return. Social connections, especially with fellow military youth, made a significant impact in helping children to cope with and buffer military-related stress.
- Gaining a more thorough understanding of the unique stressors and buffers experienced by military youth may inform the development of prevention and intervention strategies to better support military youth and their parents. There is also a need for new programs to help military families, particularly adolescents, adjust to military life stressors.

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ABSTRACT:

“The increased stress on military families during wartime can be particularly difficult for adolescents. The current study employed 11 focus groups with military youth, parents, and school personnel working with military youth to better understand how youth and their families cope with stressors faced as result of living in a military family. An inductive approach was used for data analysis, where two coders and the lead author coded the transcripts until saturation was achieved. Matrices and data display models were developed to make comparisons across participant groups. Findings revealed that military youth are most worried about making frequent moves and having a parent deployed. However, youth and their parents who had better social connections to each other, their peers, and their neighborhoods appeared to make better adjustments to these challenges. School personnel reported that more military families needed to become aware of the services offered to help families cope effectively. Implications for future research and intervention programs for military youth and their families are discussed.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Military children live in unique environments where they face the stressful challenge of enduring periodic separation from deployed parents, as well as harboring concern about their parents' safety. Military children commonly relocate to different military bases over the course of their parents' military career and find themselves having to build new friendships with every move. Every demographic group emphasized the importance of forming social connections with other military students and families within their peer networks and broader school environment to buffer military-related stress. Living on base was shown to enhance social connections among military families. A high level of social support was shown to help mediate the challenges and risks for military spouses and adolescents with military parents. Community groups and facilitators working with military families may encourage living on base, and should work to increase access to social support groups for military families. Having access to such groups has been shown to help alleviate stress for non-military parents, which in turn reduces some of the challenges faced by military children. Frequent moving, while cited as a main stressor, was also shown to increase maturity, adaptability, and self-sufficiency in military youth when compared to their civilian peers. Within the context of a strong family network, challenges faced by military youth may increase their resilience and their ability to connect with other youth. Gaining a more thorough understanding of the unique stressors and buffers experienced by military youth can inform the development of prevention and intervention strategies to better support military youth and their families. New programs are needed at the community, school and social levels aimed at helping military youth and non-military parents adjust to military-life stressors, especially the deployment process.

FOR POLICY

Policy makers may wish to focus on serving military youth and their families by establishing education policies to help military youth cope with frequent moves and the resulting disruptions in their education. The Department of Education may address these disruptions by working to establish a standard graduation format for military students, avoiding education-related disruptions during relocation, and communicating with local school systems so that educators are aware of which students are military children. It is also important that families are aware of the services being offered at schools and bases, and the military should find new ways to disseminate and communicate this information to adjusting or recently relocated families. Policy makers may also wish to fund new initiatives that can assist military youth with establishing social networks, such as school-based programs designed to connect military children with each other at school, or programs encouraging military spouses to volunteer and become involved at their children's schools. Other beneficial policy initiatives may be funding programs aimed at developing social resources for families living on base, programs connecting military families who live off base to military community resources and developing initiatives aimed at improving the connection between the education and military systems.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Additional research is needed to better understand the process of stress and coping among military families in order to explain some of the inconsistencies in previous literature. Further examination of whether adolescents with greater connections to their peers, families and teachers are able to better adjust to the effects of military related stress in comparison with military youth who may not have such strong connections is also needed. It is unclear whether such challenges lead to long-term negative outcomes in military youth, and methodological approaches may want to consider longitudinal studies to monitor youth adjustment after deployment or relocation. These studies should also attempt to incorporate a diverse sample of military youth representing families from all military branches and reserve members, children from on- and off-base schools, and off-base schools that service a large percentage of military youths. Differing personality traits may also be a determinant in how children adjust to military-related stressors, which can be measured. Data collection may need to occur away from military bases, where participants are assured confidentiality.

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