

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

How Family Structures and Processes Interrelate: The Case of Adolescent Mental Health and Academic Success in Military Families

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SUMMARY: Children of military personnel may be more likely to have depression and academic challenges due to frequent military-related moves and stressors. This study examined the impact of family structure type and family interpersonal interactions on 995 adolescents' levels of depression and academic performance. Overall, findings revealed that less focus should be on type of family structure and more focus should be on how families interact to handle stressful events.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth from married families were less likely to have depressive symptoms, and more likely to have greater academic performance than youth from single-parent families and stepfamilies.
- Adolescents with family support and positive interpersonal interactions with their parents had greater initiative and therefore, were more likely to have greater academic performance and less symptoms of depression.
- There were no differences of parent-adolescent interactions across all family structure types.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Enhance activities and curriculum related to parental support and coping behaviors to support healthy well-being among military youth and their families
- Engage youth in learning techniques to foster initiative to help them adjust to stressful situations, such as military moves and separation from their military parent
- Educate youth and military families on the importance of positive parent-child interactions as these influence health, well-being, and academic success

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that address the importance of family interactions on youth's well-being
- Recommend integrating parenting education into existing service delivery systems for military families
- Promote the development of structured activities for military families that focus on positive parent-child interactions during stressful situations

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METHODS

- Data were initially collected from 1,036 youth from four military installations (one outside of the U.S.). Specific recruitment information was not provided.
- Youth completed surveys assessing family structure (e.g., family composition), family support, parent-adolescent interpersonal interactions, initiative, symptoms of depression, and academic performance.
- Statistical analyses were conducted to examine how family structure and parent-adolescent interpersonal interactions play a role in adolescent outcomes of academic performance and depressive symptoms.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 995 adolescents of military personnel that were between the ages of 11 and 18 years old (M=13 years, SD=1.96).
- An equal amount (50%) of male and female adolescents participated. Youth were quite diverse and identified as 39% White, 19% Black, 19% Multiracial, 12% Latino/a, 9% other, and 2% Native American.
- A majority of youth lived with married parents (N=686, 66%), 179 (17%) lived in stepfamilies, and 130 (13%) in single-parent families. The remaining were excluded from the study.
- Most of youths' parents were enlisted (72%), with 65% who had experienced a change in school two or more times due to military-related moves, and 18% who had a parent who was currently deployed at the time of the study.

LIMITATIONS

- Findings may be limited as the study included self-report measures from only the youth's perspective.
- Data were cross-sectional in nature, thus it is difficult to determine the long-term effects of family structure and family processes on adolescents' academic performance and depressive symptoms.
- Results regarding adolescent mental health and academic success are also limited as the study did not include additional factors that may be contributing to parent-adolescent interactions.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Collect data from one or both parents and adolescents to examine multiple perspectives of interpersonal relationships affecting youth's well-being
- Assess how transitional periods may be affecting family interactions over time
- Examine additional factors that may contribute to positive family interactions, including time youth spend with their parents

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