

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Some Ways in Which Neighborhoods, Nuclear Families, Friendship Groups, and Schools Jointly Affect Changes in Early Adolescent Development

Cook, T. D., Herman, M. R., Phillips, M., Settersten, Jr., & R. A. (2002). Some ways in which neighborhoods, nuclear families, friendship groups, and schools jointly affect changes in early adolescent development. *Child Development*, 73(4), 1283-1309. doi:10.1111/1467-8624.00472

**SUMMARY:** An assessment of ways in which school, neighborhood, nuclear family, and friendship group contexts jointly contribute to positive change during early adolescence was conducted. Middle school students, parents, teachers, and staff from one county bordering with Washington D.C. participated in a large-scale 19-month longitudinal study. Findings suggested that focused attention on all four contexts is necessary for optimal positive outcomes for adolescents.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The family had the greatest influence on the social behavior and mental health outcomes; friendship groups related to less acting out and drug use; schools related to positive changes in attendance, and rates of entry into 8th grade algebra; and neighborhoods influenced school attendance and participation in social activities.
- All contexts together had a cumulatively larger effect on adolescent's positive outcomes.
- Adolescents who were supported by four better contexts did not show any decline across outcomes; whereas, those who were supported by four worse contexts did worse over time by almost two outcomes.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with organizations and schools connected with military parents to emphasize the importance of communication and engagement across contexts
- Provide military-connected youth and their families resources on community and youth-focused activities

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military families, schools, and community on supporting the holistic development of adolescents
- Promote the development of structured activities for military families and adolescents within their local communities

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend collaboration between military families' multiple contexts (i.e., schools, neighborhoods, friends) to more effectively support the holistic development of adolescents
- Recommend integrating holistic development models into existing service delivery systems for military-connected youth and their families

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited from 23 middle schools in Prince George's County, a county that surrounds the south and east borders of Washington, D.C.
- Middle schoolers from each cohort completed an Attitude and Climate Questionnaire and approximately 3,000 parent interviews were conducted as well as 1,500 faculty and staff interviews. In addition, annual data were also collected from district records.
- Analyses examined the extent to which quality schools were associated with quality neighborhoods, quality friends, and quality nuclear families, as well as how these jointly influenced youth's developmental changes.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The sample population included the 23 participating schools which consisted of 22,314 7th graders from entering cohorts in the 1990, 1991, and 1992 school years.
- Overall, 12,702 7th graders were a part of the longitudinal sample.
- At the community level, 65% identified as Black, 28% as White, 3% as Latino, and 4% as Asian American; however, at the individual level racial and ethnic backgrounds were not provided.

## LIMITATIONS

- Inclusion of just one county in the U.S. limits the generalizability of the findings.
- There were no Latino youth or families included in the sample, due to limited parental consent; therefore, the findings cannot be extended to this population.
- Simultaneous random assignment to family, friend, school, and neighborhood quality was impossible; therefore the findings presented depend on the assumptions built into the models tested and should be interpreted with caution.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Broaden the scope of contexts through a representative sample of military-connected youth, families, schools, and communities which would evaluate the generalizability of the findings described in this research
- Explore in more depth how adolescents living in four consistently better contexts are supported in developmentally positive ways
- Examine risk and protective factors across social contexts for military-connected youth living within civilian communities

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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