

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Network Supports and Resiliency Among U.S. Military Spouses With Children With Special Health Care Needs

Farrell, A. F., Bowen, G. L., & Swick, D. C. (2014). Network supports and resiliency among U.S. Military spouses with children with special health care needs. *Family Relations*, 63(1), 55-70. doi:10.1111/fare.12045

SUMMARY: U.S. Air Force wives whose children had special health needs were compared to wives of children without special needs on measures of support and resiliency. Wives with special health needs children felt less supported than the comparison group. Resiliency for Air Force wives with special needs kids was stronger for those who have support from friends, neighbors, and the military.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Air Force wives with special health needs children reported lower support in seven domains than parents without special needs children (relationship support, extended family support, friend support, neighbor support, unit spouse support, community support, and military support).
- Wives of Air Force officers reported higher levels of support from friends, neighbors, units, community, and military than wives of other Air Force personnel.
- Air Force wives with special health needs children reported lower coping success than parents without special needs children, but reported equal levels of the other three resiliency measures (parent management, support for others, and overall spouse resiliency).
- Of wives with special health needs children, friend support was significantly associated with coping success. Both friend and neighbor support were associated with better parent management.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for military families dealing with children with special needs
- Provide spouse support groups at bases to promote friendships among all Service members spouses
- Disseminate information regarding the resources and services available to military families who have a child with special needs

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that offer regular wives activities to promote friendships among Service members spouses
- Consider the unique barriers to resiliency faced by Service members with special health needs children
- Continue to support programs that offer services and resources to military families with a child with special needs

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METHODS

- A secondary data analysis was conducted on data collected between February and March 2011 from U.S. Air Force spouses.
- The primary constructs being measured were support and resiliency (assessed with the Support and Resiliency Inventory-Spouse version).
- Female spouses of male Air Force members who have at least one child were the target participants for this study.

PARTICIPANTS

- One thousand one hundred-four spouses completed questionnaires (approximately 25-30% completion rate from population across these 62 bases).
- Nineteen percent of participants had a child with special health needs. Most participants were stationed within the continental United States (85%) and were between the ages of 26-35 (47%) or 36-45 (43%). Race/ethnicity was not reported.
- Participants spouses were nearly equally split between enlisted personnel (51%) and officers (49%).

LIMITATIONS

- The questionnaire used here did not identify parent, child, or family characteristics that impact resiliency and family functioning limiting that validity of the results.
- As a secondary data analysis, little information is given about the methodology used in the original data collection.
- Participants were from the Air Force; therefore, it is unknown whether these findings can generalize to other branches of the military.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Utilize a longitudinal design and seek to have a larger and more diverse sample
- Measure relevant child characteristics that are known to impact family functioning
- Examine how formal and informal support networks affect resiliency for military parents of children with special health needs

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