

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Air Force

Sources of Parenting Support in Early Fatherhood: Perspectives of United States Air Force Members

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SUMMARY: Fathers' access to parenting information during the transition to parenthood and how best to engage fathers in parenting intervention programs were explored. Fathers emphasize the importance of information in facilitating the transition to parenthood, especially in the key domains of effective co-parenting and communication, children's developmental milestones, and appropriate use of discipline. Results underscore that men tend to rely more on informal sources of parenting information (e.g., spouse or partner, family members, friends) than on formal sources of information (e.g., pediatricians, social workers).

KEY FINDINGS:

- Fathers were eager to access and participate in father-focused resources and services, but were aware of relatively few resources available to them on-base or in the local community.
- Fathers expressed a strong interest in being able to access relevant parenting information through non-stigmatizing avenues and without being made to feel that they were using resources intended for mothers or not going against gender norms by seeking support.
- Participants consistently reported a high level of trust in information provided by their fellow U.S. Air Force (USAF) members, and indicated that they hold USAF resources for families in high esteem.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Support the development of a social media discussion platform (e.g. military branch list-serve, Facebook) for Service members and families to discuss parenting
- Partner with early childhood learning and intervention programs to provide specific resources and support for fathers
- Develop online modules that focus on effective parenting practices that Service members and their families can use in raising their young children

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend awareness campaigns on the importance of early childhood learning and development for military families and their children
- Continue efforts with each military branch to foster partnerships with community early childhood organizations in supporting Service members and their families
- Develop incentive plans for fathers to participate in on-line parent education programs

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through a mass e-mail sent by USAF Family Advocacy Program (FAP) personnel, with attached recruitment flyers.
- Focus group methods were used in this study. The questions asked of participants focused on fathers' experience parenting young children from birth to three years old.
- Analysis included three members of the research team independently reading each transcript, discussing divergent coding, and establishing consensus on common themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- All participants were Active Duty Service members of the U.S. Air Force, lived on a large base in the Southern U.S., and 26% lived with a spouse or partner who was also Active Duty military.
- Focus groups were conducted with 39 fathers and 68% had one child three years or younger.
- The average age of participants was 32 years old, 48% of the sample had two children and 21% had four or more children.
- Participants identified as White (58%), Latino (26%), Black (13%), or Other (3%).

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was of male USAF Service members selected from one base in the Southern United States; therefore, the findings are not generalizable to all Active Duty fathers in the USAF.
- About 40% of the fathers were reflecting upon past experiences raising their young children; which could be different to those currently raising young children.
- Military factors such as a fathers' deployment or relocation were not reported; which could affect the findings of the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore fathers from a variety of different military contexts and ranks experiences' parenting young children
- Evaluate the effectiveness of on-line parenting resources for military fathers in terms of access, usage, and utility
- Investigate military fathers' experiences parenting children and youth and what resources they have found supportive

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