

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

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

Mmari, K. N., Bradshaw, C. P., Sudhinaraset, M., & Blum, R. (2010). Exploring the role of social connectedness among military youth: Perceptions from youth, parents, and school personnel. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 39(5), 351-366. doi:10.1007/s10566-010-9109-3

**SUMMARY:** Moving between states or countries provides military youth with a unique experience during an important developmental stage for social connection. This study examined the experiences of adolescents at multiple bases via focus groups of military adolescents, parents, and school personnel. Results indicated a high amount of resilience among this population and some opportunities for support.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The two main stressors for adolescents in military families were frequent moves, which led adolescents to have to regularly make new friends and to have repetitive or disconnected educational experiences; and the experience of the deployment cycle, which involved fear for the deployed parent's safety, stress related to possible struggles of the non-deployed parent, and reintegration of the deployed parent upon return.
- Social connection was the most important coping skill for military adolescents and their parents. Participants demonstrated this by living on or spending time on base; building relationships with other military adolescents or parents who understood them and had similar experiences; and identifying as part of a military culture which provides opportunities for new experiences, to build social skills, and to be independent and mature.
- School personnel in particular noticed that military families often seemed unaware of the resources available to support them or how to access such services, and therefore these services were underutilized. School personnel often found communication between military bases and schools could be improved.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military couples about the stress of deployment on the non-deployed parent, how this can affect their children, how to improve coping skills, and how to access resources
- Offer workshops or activities during reintegration to help Service members reconnect with their adolescents
- Disseminate information via multiple avenues regarding currently existing resources for military families during periods of potential stress such as relocation and deployment

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of programs that can increase social connection for families of deployed Service members
- Encourage collaboration between DoD and community-based schools to improve and streamline military adolescents' education
- Recommend professional education for school personnel who work with military adolescents regarding potential difficulties, strengths, and experiences of these students

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## METHODS

- There were 11 focus groups at eight military bases (Air Force, Navy, Marines, and Army) for three categories of participants: military youth, military parents (i.e., Service members or spouses), and school personnel (e.g., guidance counselors, principals, teachers). Only Active Duty military personnel and their families were eligible.
- The military bases were selected by the DoD due to heavy impact of Base Realignment and Closure. A staff member connected to schools and military families at each base was responsible for recruiting focus group participants.
- Data were collected from focus groups, which included 8-10 participants, a facilitator, and a note-taker, and were held from February to September 2006 on or near military bases.
- Participant conversations during the focus group were analyzed through a multi-step process to establish themes.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Military youth participants (n = 39) were 61% female, 14.6 years old on average, and in grades 6-12. They reported an average of six military-related moves, 46% had a currently deployed parent and 90% had a parent who ever deployed.
- Parent participants (n = 24) were 71% female, 42 years old on average, had 2.5 children on average, and 67% were the spouse of a Service member.
- School personnel participants (n = 35) were 61% female, 50 years old on average, had been employed at their school from three to 37 years, and worked with military students on average 79% percent of the time.

## LIMITATIONS

- The participating bases were selected by DoD and not random, limiting the generalizability of the study.
- Demographic data were not utilized in data analysis, therefore the study could not draw conclusions based on specific branches of the military, rank of the military parent, race/ethnicity, age, or other demographics.
- Participants were self-selected and may differ in unknown ways from non-participants.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Engage in a similar study longitudinally to allow for exploration over time of the participants' experiences
- Explore the reasons military adolescents and parents are unaware of or not utilizing available resources to cope with the stresses of relocation and deployment
- Explore the experiences of social connectedness of military families and non-military families in terms of formal and informal support systems (e.g., extended families, friends, schools, military support service agencies)

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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