

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Human-Animal Interaction as a Context for Thriving and Coping in Military-Connected Youth: The Role of Pets During Deployment

Mueller, M. K., & Callina, K. S. (2014). Human-animal interaction as a context for thriving and coping in military-connected youth: The role of pets during deployment. *Applied Developmental Science, 18*(4), 214-223.
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SUMMARY: Survey data from military youth were utilized to examine how the presence of a companion animal in the home impacted resilient functioning strategies and coping. Attachment to an animal was associated with positive youth development and adaptive coping for youth with a deployed family member. Pets may be an effective resource to help military children with military-related stressors (i.e. deployment).

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth who had a currently deployed family member had higher stress levels than those who did not have a deployed family member.
- Among youth whose parent was deployed, higher levels of attachment to an animal were related to use of more adaptive coping strategies.
- Higher attachment to a companion animal was significantly associated with positive youth development, regardless of parental deployment status.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer opportunities for families to engage in human-animal interaction (e.g., during after-school programs or peer support groups) to help maintain resiliency and improve mood across the deployment cycle
- Disseminate information to military families about the potential benefits of pet ownership
- Provide information to families about normative and problematic responses to deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support the development of programs that utilize companion animals as a way to promote positive coping among military families
- Recommend professional education for staff that work with military families and youth about the benefits of human-animal interaction
- Encourage research that evaluates the feasibility of implementing animal-assisted therapy programs, school-based initiatives, and animal-related education programs to help military families manage stress

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METHODS

- Online survey links were sent via email and social media outlets to middle and high school students who participated in the Student-2-Student program.
- Parents were asked to read and sign an informed consent prior to their child completing the 30-minute online survey.
- Only youth who reported being in a military family were included in the current study.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 286 military youth in grades six through 12.
- The majority of participants were female (60%) and the average age was 15 years.
- Seventy-four percent of participants owned a pet; 61% owned dogs, 25% owned cats, and 14% owned fish.
- Of the total participants, 17% had at least one family member currently deployed.

LIMITATIONS

- A convenience sample was employed of students in a specific program; the extent to which findings generalize to military children more broadly is unknown.
- The majority of the sample were military youth who owned pets; therefore, it is uncertain how rates of resilience compare to military families who do not have pets.
- The reliance of self-report data may have introduced reporting biases regarding deployment stress.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the processes involved in human-animal interaction and thriving military youth with a more diverse sample
- Explore possible obstacles to pet ownership, including installation restrictions, frequent family moves, and expenses related to owning a pet
- Investigate how pet ownership impacts military family functioning of all family members not just children

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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