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


**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

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.
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
Design: Appropriate Research Plan and Sample
Methods: Appropriate Measurement and Analysis
Limitations: Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit: https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works

www.reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu