

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Navy

## Posttraumatic Stress Symptom Trajectories in Children Living in Families Reported for Family Violence

Nugent, N.R., Saunders, B.E., Williams, L.M., Hanson, R., Smith, D.W., & Fitzgerald, M.M. (2009). Posttraumatic stress symptom trajectories in children living in families reported for family violence. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 22*(5), 460-466. doi:10.1002/jts.20440

**SUMMARY:** Children may develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms following family violence at different rates based on demographic and prior trauma characteristics. Interviews assessed children at four separate time points following reported trauma to measure changes in PTSD symptom levels over time. Separate symptom development classes were explored and factors associated with them were explored.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Two PTSD symptom development paths were determined: a "resilient" class that reported few or no symptoms, and a "persistent symptom" class that reported moderate symptom levels across all interviews.
- Youth reporting a greater number of traumatic experiences at the first interview and older youth were more likely to fit into the persistent symptom class.
- Female participants were more likely to report child sexual abuse and were more likely to fit into the persistent symptom class.
- Participants referred for intimate partner violence reported fewer PTSD symptoms at three of the four time points.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer programs for military families that focus on family violence prevention
- Provide support groups for military families tailored to female youth that have experienced sexual abuse
- Educate military families with a history of abuse or family violence about PTSD symptoms and support services

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that provide intervention to military families with a history of family violence
- Promote collaboration between military programs and community organizations around identifying military families in need of family violence intervention services
- Recommend training of professionals who work with military families around PTSD symptom patterns in children of military families with a history of family violence

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.



# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



## METHODS

- Children participating in the Navy Family Study with prior allegations of child sexual abuse, child physical abuse, or intimate partner violence were selected.
- Interviews were used to gather information on history of traumatic experiences and PTSD symptoms at four separate times.
- Demographic factors, trauma type, and changes in PTSD symptoms across the time points were used to determine different classes of symptom development.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 201 children ages 7 to 18 years (M=12; SD=3).
- The majority of participants were female (64%) and most were White (52%) or Black (30%).
- Most parents were married (72%) or separated (24%) and the mean age for both mothers and fathers was 34 years (SD=5) and at least one parent was a Navy Service member.

## LIMITATIONS

- The interview instrument required that children were at least seven years old. Therefore, the findings may not generalize to younger children.
- Only participants living in a household with two adults involved in parental roles were included; thus, the results may not generalize well to other family structures.
- In the intimate partner violence group, the oldest child in the family (18 years or younger) was selected as the participant; selecting the older child may have biased this group toward having increased coping skills or longer history of trauma.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess the PTSD symptom development in younger children with a history of family trauma
- Explore the development of PTSD symptoms following family violence in a variety of family structure types
- Examine the impact of family violence on the long-term development of PTSD symptoms

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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