

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Do Youth Development Programs Matter? An Examination of Transitions and Well-Being Among Military Youth

Richardson, E. W., Mallette, J. K., O'Neal, C. W., & Mancini, J. A. (2016). Do youth development programs matter? An examination of transitions and well-being among military youth. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(6), 1765-1776. doi:10.1007/s10826-016-0361-5

SUMMARY: Well-being is of paramount concern during adolescence, particularly for military youth who experience unique stressors associated with military lifestyle. This study examined the relationship between risk factors (e.g., parental deployment), participation in Army sponsored extracurricular programs, and youth well-being in a sample of 11 to 14 year-olds. Results suggested that supportive social relationships were related to improved well-being. Although several risk factors were related to decreased well-being, participation in extracurricular activities buffered the negative impact of these risk factors.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth who felt a stronger sense of support in their social relationships reported fewer depressive symptoms and greater self-efficacy.
- Parental rank, living further than 30 minutes from the military installation, and frequently moving schools was associated with more depressive symptoms, greater anxiety, and less self-efficacy.
- Participation in U.S. Army Child, Youth, and School Services programs and activities buffered the negative impact of parental deployment and having multiple military parents on well-being.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Expand extracurricular programming for youth to provide them with healthier and more supportive social relationships
- Offer workshops for families about how to facilitate positive relationships during adolescence
- Provide education for youth about healthy relationship skills, such as communication and conflict resolution

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage training for extracurricular program staff about how to facilitate positive relationships among youth
- Support the development of programming that teaches youth important relationship skills
- Continue to provide support for extracurricular programs and activities for youth

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METHODS

- Youth at four U.S. Army garrisons in the United States and Europe voluntarily completed questionnaires. No recruitment information was provided.
- Youth answered questions about their relationships, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and self-efficacy. Background information about youth were also collected.
- Statistical analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between youths' lifestyles and home environments, extracurricular participation, and well-being.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 749 youth between 11 and 14 years, with an average age of 12 years (SD = 1.08). Just over half of participants were male (51%). No race/ethnicity data were provided.
- Within the sample, 71% of youth had a parent who was enlisted, 8% had two parents on Active Duty, and 18% had a parent who was currently deployed.
- Almost half (44%) of participants lived outside the continental United States, and 9% lived more than 30 minutes from a military installation. About 65% switched schools at least twice in the past five years.

LIMITATIONS

- This was a cross-sectional study, which means the causal link between risk factors, extracurricular participation, and well-being cannot be established.
- Because researchers only measured youth participation in Army sponsored extracurricular programs or activities, youths' involvement in other programs or activities were not captured in statistical analyses.
- Only youth between the ages of 11 and 14 years were included in this study, which limits the ability to generalize to younger and older youth.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use a longitudinal design to determine whether risk factors and extracurricular participation directly impact youth well-being
- Measure participation in both military and non-military sponsored extracurricular programs
- Include a wider range of ages to measure whether these associations remain the same for younger and/or older youth

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