

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Are Children of Military Parents More Physically Fit Than Children of Civilian Parents?

Stephens, M. B., Harrison, J. J., Wilson, C., Ringler, R. L., & Robinson, C. (2003). Are children of military parents more physically fit than children of civilian parents? *Family Medicine*, 35(6), 404-407.

SUMMARY: A group of 170 third-grade students participated in this study to determine whether children of military parents are healthier and more active than children of civilian parents. Compared to civilians, children of Service members performed poorer on fitness tests and watched more hours of television.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth in military families performed significantly worse in the sit-and-reach and the one-mile run compared to their civilian peers.
- Military-affiliated youth watched significantly more television than their civilian peers.
- Children of enlisted Service members had significantly lower scores on fitness tests and watched significantly more television than children of officers.
- Among all youth, more television viewing was associated with poorer fitness.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes for Service members and their partners to increase skills around structuring children's out-of-school time
- Provide opportunities for military youth to participate in sports, dance, and other after-school fitness activities
- Create programs for Service members and their children to engage in physical activities together

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training for professionals who work with military families regarding strategies to increase the physical fitness of military youth
- Continue to support the development of healthy lifestyle programs and activities for military children
- Encourage investigation of possible explanations for the increased use of media and decreased fitness of military-affiliated youth

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METHODS

- A letter was sent to third grade students. Of 246 eligible third grade students, 170 completed both a survey and a physical fitness test (70% response rate).
- All participants completed the National Child and Youth Fitness Survey to measure attitudes towards fitness and the President's Council on Physical Fitness Test to measure physical fitness.
- Data were analyzed to determine whether youth in military families differed from youth in civilian families.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 170 students from two schools.
- Students included 51% girls and 51% children of Service members.
- All participants were in the third grade.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample only consisted of third-grade students, so results may not extend to other age groups.
- Parents' service branches were not included, so it is unclear to which branches these findings may extend.
- Only hours of television consumed was considered for media consumption; use of other types of media may account for some of the differences found in this study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine these variables in children with a greater variety of ages
- Use pedometers or other technology to track actual day-to-day activity levels
- Collect longitudinal data to examine the trajectory of physical fitness over time for military and civilian youth

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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