

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

How Early Childhood Teachers Perceive the Educational Needs of Military Dependent Children

Stites, M. L. (2016). How early childhood teachers perceive the educational needs of military dependent children. *Early Childhood Educational Journal*, 44(2), 107-117. doi:10.1007/s10643-015-0698-1

SUMMARY: Military dependent children have unique experiences and educational needs versus non-military dependent children. This study analyzed early childhood teachers' perspectives of the socioemotional growth and academic progress of military dependent children compared their non-military dependent peers. Overall findings indicated that parental separation and geographic mobility have some negative impact but there are noted positive perceptions of military dependent students as well, such as their adaptability and worldliness.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Military dependent children lacked stability due to geographic mobility and parental separation, but teachers regarded them as also being more worldly and adaptable than non-military dependent peers.
- Parental separation was viewed as having a negative impact on the academic progress and socioemotional development of military dependent children while geographic mobility negatively impacted academic progress but not socioemotional development.
- Teachers did not perceive the military dependent children as having higher levels of negative behaviors than non-military dependent children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Facilitate parent-child bonding activities for Service members and their families, especially upon return from deployment
- Coordinate with local early childhood educators to host homework assistance and tutoring sessions for children of Service members
- Allow children of Service members to contribute to program lessons based on their strengths and background knowledge such as through show and tell lessons

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend specific training for early childhood teachers who may teach military dependent children
- Continue to support programs that assist military families and dependents during times of deployment
- Promote the creation of educational assessments for military dependent children that can be used by new schools to understand baseline levels of the student's academic achievement

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.



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METHODS

- Pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, first and second grade, and primary special education teachers in schools near Fort Meade, Maryland were recruited for the study via an emailed web-based survey.
- Teachers were asked to provide their perceptions on three main areas via open-ended and Likert-scale questions: geographic mobility, parental separation, and socioemotional factors of military children.
- The email invitation was sent to 152 teachers with 63 responding, resulting in a response rate of 41%.

PARTICIPANTS

- County teachers' data indicated: five were early childhood intervention teachers, seven were Pre-K, 41 were kindergarten, 44 were first grade, 45 were second grade, and 10 were primary special education.
- Demographic questions were answered by 57 of the 63 teachers: five were early childhood intervention teachers, eight Pre-K, 15 kindergarten, 10 first grade, 11 second grade, and eight special education.
- The years of teaching ranged from one to 36 ($M = 9.18$), and the number of military dependents ranged from 0 to 36 ($M = 7.93$), and the majority of teachers were not military dependents.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample came from one geographic area with a fairly low response rate, making generalizability a challenge.
- A larger proportion of early childhood intervention teachers, Pre-K, and special education teachers who were invited actually responded to the invitation, while fewer kindergarten through second grade teachers responded, indicating a possible selection bias.
- The open-ended, qualitative questions elicited few and incomplete responses that were unspecific regarding supports needed for students, which led researchers to believe respondents did not fully understand or make meaning of the questions.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Expand geographic reach of the surveys to better understand what differences or similarities of teacher perceptions may be present across the country and near bases that vary in deployment tempo
- Consider holding interviews or focus groups with early childhood teachers to get more meaningful qualitative data versus open-ended survey questions without follow-up
- Conduct primary data collection from children along with teacher perspectives for an in-depth analysis

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