

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

The Effects of Stress and Social Support on Externalizing Behaviors Among Children in Military Families

Sumner, J., Boisvert, D., & Andersen, J. (2016). The effects of stress and social support on externalizing behaviors among children in military families. *Deviant Behavior*, 37(3), 246-262. doi:10.1080/01639625.2015.1012403

SUMMARY: Stress and the ways that families cope with stress often have a large impact on children's behavior, which may be particularly relevant for military families. This study investigated externalizing behaviors among military children and associations with family stress and social support. Findings indicated that, while military wives with high stress levels reported greater child externalizing behavior, strong social support among military wives served as a protective factor against the effects of stress and was related to lower levels of child externalizing behavior.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Military wives with high stress levels reported more problematic externalizing behaviors among their children.
- Strong social support of military wives was related to fewer externalizing behaviors among their children.
- Social support served as a protective factor against the effects of stress among military families.
- Factors such as number of relocations, length of deployments, and status of Service member were related to the amount of stress and social support military wives reported.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer programming that encourages Service members and their families to support one another and discuss stressors with each other
- Provide information regarding potential sources of social support available to Service members and their families
- Develop classes to help Service members and their families identify and cope with stress, including teaching the benefits of social support

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development and continuation of programs that build social support among Service members' families
- Encourage professionals who work with Service members and their families to offer education and resources related to social support and its impact on parenting and child behavior
- Recommend training of professionals to better identify and provide resources for Service members and their families who may be experiencing low levels of social support

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

- Participants were recruited for one month through the National Military Family Association website's weekly newsletter, as well as through distribution of the survey to known military personnel.
- Data were collected through an online survey regarding social support, stress, and child behavior.
- Associations between social support, stress, and children's externalizing behaviors were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 198 military wives who were predominantly White (88%), had an average age of 40 years old (SD = 5.51), and had a child over the age of 6 years old living in the home.
- Of participants who reported demographic information, all were Service members' wives.
- The sample included wives of Army (40%), Navy (32%), Coast Guard (20%), and Marine Corps (7%) members.
- Participants reported an average of five relocations and 31 months of Service member deployment time.

LIMITATIONS

- While survey recruitment targeted Service members, spouses, and partners, all participants indicated they were wives of Service members, and most were White and unemployed, which may reduce the ability to generalize results to military families with different demographics.
- Due to the use of non-randomly selected participants, via newsletter recruitment and sending surveys to known Service members, selection bias may have played a role in the study results.
- Only externalizing behavior of the oldest child in each family was considered, meaning results may not generalize to middle children or youngest children.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate what specific types of social support help decrease the effects of stress and externalizing behavior among military families and children
- Conduct a similar study sampling oldest, middle, and youngest military children to examine whether family stress and social support play similar roles on child behavior across birth order
- Evaluate the effects self-reported levels of stress and social support among military children to understand the effects on externalizing behavior

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>