



Mother and Soldier: Raising a Child with a Disability in a Low-Income Military Family.

Taylor, N.E., Wall, S.M., Liebow, H., Sabatino, C.A., Timberlake, E.M., & Farber, M.Z. (2005). *Exceptional Children*, 71(1), 83-99. <http://journals.cec.sped.org/>



This study of six low-income service member mothers sought to identify the impact of personal characteristics and external support systems on their ability to continue in the military while caring for a child with a disability. The interviews revealed the military mothers' personal strengths, barriers confronted, coping strategies, and the impact of caring for the child on their personal and professional lives. Despite reported determination to meet their children's needs and positive views of their children's growth and development, a majority of the participants eventually left their military careers, citing reasons such as the strain of assuming primary parenting responsibilities and a lack of support by military family services.

Key Findings:

- Despite all participants initially having military career intentions 4 of the 6 women concluded they could not successfully balance their role as soldier and mother and therefore left the service.
- Low military salaries, inadequate or unavailable military housing, military childcare with long wait lists (1 year in one case) and the work demands of the military contributed to the mothers' reported stress.
- Mothers perceived military family services (such as the Exceptional Family Member Program; EFMP) as not particularly helpful, and in one case harmful.

Implications for Programs:

- Military programs might consider ensuring access to on-base child care for children with special needs, helping to coordinate child care and therapeutic interventions, and targeting interventions to families at highest risk due to low-income circumstances.
- Low-income military families may need additional guidance in obtaining access to appropriate services (such as Early Head Start, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).
- Programs may wish to provide outreach and supportive services to low-income mothers to assist them in juggling the demands of caring for a child with a disability and military life.

Implications for Policies:

- Resources aimed at coordinating services including housing, child care and medical and treatment appointments for families with children with special needs may help improve retention of service members.
- Additional resources aimed at assessing and meeting the needs of military families with children with special needs may be beneficial.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Additional studies including military mothers of other demographic profiles with special needs children may be useful in suggesting or developing appropriate services.
- Continued examination of efficacy of the EFMP may be useful, especially from the perspective of the low-income enlisted members and single mothers.
- Future research might incorporate military families with children with special needs who have been able to balance the demands of soldiering and parenting to understand how they are able to successfully manage the numerous stressors associated with caregiving.

Background Information

Methodology:

- Data from military mothers was a subset of a larger national study to evaluate Early Head Start programs. Mothers participated in in-depth 90-minute open-ended interviews.
- The interviews were designed to capture the mother's understanding of child development, reaction to being notified of the child's special needs and their experiences with Child Find or Early Identification, as applicable.
- Transcripts were analyzed using the constant-comparative qualitative method to identify 3 major themes: characteristics of the women, nonmilitary support systems, and parenting a child with disabilities and available military support systems.






Participants:

- 6 military mothers who had given birth to at least one child with suspected or confirmed developmental disabilities while enlisted.
- Mean maternal age at time of interview = 28.5 (range 22-33); 3 African American, 2 Caucasian, 1 Hispanic; 3 married, 2 single, 1 divorced.
- Average years in military = 8.7 (range = 3-12), income range = \$11,669-\$24,890, no specification of service branch.
- Average child with disability's age (in months) = 21.5 (range = 7-31).

Limitations:

- There is no comparison data for enlisted mothers in general or enlisted mothers (non-low-income) with special needs children, making it impossible to compare how these mothers might differ on demographic and other variables.
- The interviews were conducted in the context of a different study and were not aimed at enlisted military mothers.
- This was a small sample size (N=6), and the experiences of these mothers might not be representative.

Assessing Research that Works

| Research Design and Sample | | | | Quality Rating: |  |
|---|---|--|---|---|---|
| | Excellent (★★★★) | Appropriate (★★★) | Limited (★★) | Questionable (★) | |
| The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Research Methods | | | | Quality Rating: |  |
| | Excellent (★★★★) | Appropriate (★★★) | Limited (★★) | Questionable (★) | |
| The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Limitations | | | | Quality Rating: |  |
| | Excellent Minor Limitations (★★★★) | Appropriate Few Limitations (★★★) | Limited Several Limitations (★★) | Questionable Many/Severe Limitations (★) | |
| The limitations of this study are... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Implications | | | | Quality Rating: |  |
| | Excellent (★★★★) | Appropriate (★★★) | Limited (★★) | Questionable (★) | |
| The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications | | | | | |
| Overall Quality Rating | | | | |  |