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14. ABSTRACT

Today's military youth face significant developmental challenges during transitions which demand increased attention on improving current programs to reduce anxiety, maintain social connectedness, and bridge the gap between programs and opportunities offered on base as opposed to those offered off base. Despite increased awareness, military-connected counselor support, and administrative efficiencies, military youth are still at risk due to the instability associated with geographical separation from former peer and social support systems. These risks impact the emotional, cognitive, social, and physical development of military youth during a volatile stage of development. The Department of Defense should invest in continued research efforts to gain a deeper understanding of this challenge and create additional effective programming to mitigate the challenges for its military population such as increasing military-connected counselors, physically in schools and virtually, and the development of youth programs that reconnect military children from previous duty stations in order to enhance stability and promote positive youth development.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

THE DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACTS OF MILITARY CULTURE ON ITS CHILDREN

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Executive Summary

Title: The Developmental Impacts of Military Culture on Its Children

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Thesis: Today's military youth face significant social and psychological developmental challenges during transitions which demand increased attention on improving current programs to reduce anxiety, maintain social connectedness, and bridge the gap between programs and opportunities offered on base as opposed to those offered off base.

Discussion: The past 20 years have placed significant hardships on military personnel and their families due to continuous deployments in support of combat and global operations. Research prior to the turn of the century primarily centered on holistic challenges associated with youth regarding cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. The increase in deployment rates resulted in an increased focus on the challenges associated with the psychological and social impacts of military culture on its children. Studies such as *School Transitions Among Military Adolescents* from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (2010), *Health and Mental Needs of Children in US Military Families* by Chadley Huebner (2019), and *Adolescents in Wartime US Military Families: A Developmental Perspective on Challenges and Resources* by Norweeta Milburn and Marguerita Lightfoot are among the many efforts aimed to address the developmental impacts on military youth due to relocations. Through policy and guidance, instructions such as the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children attempt to reduce anxiety on families that are forced to relocate due to military orders. However, much of these programs offer organizational support, but lack impact to the individual student. Furthermore, the disparity between on and off base opportunities indicates vastly different experiences and subsequent social and psychological impacts. The positive results of the Department of Defense Education Activity schools comprise of less than 20% of the school-aged population, resulting in a majority of the population demanding increased attention due to the associated risks.

Conclusion: Research indicates that despite increased awareness, military-connected counselor support, and administrative efficiencies, military youth are still at risk due to the instability associated with geographical separation from their former system. For clarity, the term "system" refers to the network comprised of informal and formal individual, family, and social support. While the military should retain each of these support mechanisms, efforts to strengthen the system surrounding military youth should become an area of greater emphasis and focus. The primary objective of reducing risks to military youth that face relocations should be on maintaining stability within their respective systems, which ultimately promotes healthy and lasting development. However, obstacles to this effort include limited existing resources that provide the social and emotional stability from past networks following a relocation. The developmental impacts of relocation of military children is an under-researched topic of great importance to the health and well-being of the military family. The Department of Defense should invest in continued research efforts to gain a deeper understanding of this challenge and create additional effective programming to mitigate the challenges for its military population. Improved programmatic efforts may feature youth programs and camps that reconnect military

children from previous duty stations in order to enhance stability and promote positive development.

Preface

The narrative surrounding the military youth of today's armed services often describes the population as resilient, adaptable, communicative, and mature. However, this group also faces significant and unavoidable challenges that affect their psychological and social development. As a citizen, Marine, husband, and parent, my exposure to the developmental challenges of military youth has resulted in a passion to explore current research in an attempt to improve the positive development of today's military youth. Much of the information within this research paper incorporates existing Department of Defense (DoD) programs, theories from child and adolescent psychologists, and my own experience as a father to military children. With the utmost gratitude, this research paper is devoted to my three children in an effort to create a positive impact on the health and long-term development of all military children.

Introduction

Overview

The children of our Armed Forces face unique challenges that require a considerable amount of resiliency and adaptability. Over the past 20 years, much of the focus concerning military children focuses on the psychological effects of combat-related issues that negatively affect the family.^{1,2,3,4} Yet, outside of these important factors, military children face additional challenges in the constant relocation inherent to the military lifestyle. The pace and impact of relocation produces negative outcomes for military children who suffer from lack of consistent friendships and social interactions. During their adolescent lives, kindergarten through 12th grade, children of our Armed Forces are required to move anywhere from six to nine times.⁵ These numbers are significant in that they represent that military children move, on average, three times more than their civilian counterparts do. Military families face difficult choices with each military move. Either the family moves as a complete unit, or they choose a less-desirable option that is the physical separation of the service member relocating to the new duty station while the family stays behind. Most families opt to relocate as a unit, knowingly and unknowingly, exposing their children to uncertain outcomes. While military children are resilient and adaptable, these moves often cause them to face significant mental and social challenges when forced to depart from their established norms. The friends made at the previous duty station are quickly forgotten as the higher priority becomes establishing new friends at the new duty station. There are also additional considerations with the transition in that the move may involve a complete change to living style, meaning instead of the fairly consistent life of on base housing, children may find themselves challenged by living off base in the local community. Naturally, more military-specific programs are offered on base, yet greater than 80 percent of military children live off

base and are in local U.S. public schools, which present significant challenges during transitions.⁶ An analysis regarding the effects of social instability due to transition provides an opportunity to enhance existing programs and offer new strategies for strengthening our military youth.

Approach to Research

To gain a deeper understanding of this important problem, this research paper will address the following research questions:

- Which aspects of military culture have historically had the strongest impact on the social connectedness and psychological development of its children?
- Is there data to suggest that frequent relocation has an impact on the social connectedness and anxiety of military children?
- What is the difference between on and off base programs that address the social connectedness and anxiety of military children?
- What strategies should military leadership consider to manage the challenges placed on military children associated with frequent relocations?

A foundational understanding of the collective challenges of military youth is required prior to assessing the impact of transition on this population. Youth development varies as children progress from early child education to graduation from high school. For the purposes of this report, the scope of research ranges from late childhood to early adolescence. This age range offers an opportunity to examine an important transitional period in youth development strongly influenced by family and peer networks. Furthermore, the research focuses on the disparities in educational and programmatic opportunities for military children living off base as opposed to on base.

Methodology

A review of the literature that explores the varying aspects central to military transitions that affect military youth development will be the primary means for addressing these research questions. Following the literature review is an analysis and comparison of stressors affecting military children living on and off military bases. This research focuses particular attention on the educational and social opportunities as they foster anxiety within military children. This report then concludes with recommendations for improvements to existing military transition programs by offering new programs that directly support youth development for military children during transitions. Today's military youth face significant social and psychological developmental factors during transitions which demand increased attention on improving current programs to reduce anxiety during transition, maintain social connectedness during transition, and to bridge the gap between programs and opportunities offered on base as opposed to those offered off base.

Preview Statement

The organizational structure of this paper consists of first, a literature review, followed by an analysis section, and then concludes with a discussion featuring recommendations. The literature review will be divided into three sections: (1) the challenges of youth development and more specifically, military-connected children during transitions; (2) the social and psychological impacts on military children due to transitions; and (3) the current programs and policies both on- and off-base that address this problem. The analysis section will identify the stressors unique to military youth during transitions and provide recommended coping strategies followed by an identification of the differences between on and off base schools in order to bridge the gap between services provided. The paper will conclude with recommendations for continued

programmatic improvement at the national and individual school level in order to raise awareness for areas of concern that require further attention.

Literature Review

It is without question, that childhood and adolescence are significant stages in a person's life. Specifically, late childhood (8-10 years of age) into early adolescence (11-14 years of age) marks a period in a young person's life that transitions from basic developmental skills to those that require social interaction outside of the family. Exponential growth occurs in the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development of children during this period and further reinforces the necessity for a positive and stable environment.

Cognitive development focuses on the processes required for memory, attention, language, problem solving, and planning.⁷ More specifically, a transitional period occurs during late childhood and early adolescence, as children shift from "concrete, 'black and white' thinking to abstract thought, moral reasoning, and metacognition that includes the use of hypothetical situations, metaphors, and logic."⁸ This dynamic shift in cognitive thought results in youth beginning to explore and compare alternative thoughts, reflecting the ability to conduct higher-level thinking. This significant shift in children's cognitive abilities has a significant impact on their parents and family as a whole. Cognitive development in youth is highly influenced by external factors such as family environment, school, medical conditions, and emotional or physical trauma.⁹ Children within the military community are exposed to factors that differ from the civilian population. The children of service members are exposed to factors inherent to the military lifestyle which enable the development of additional cognitive capabilities. For example, military youth obtain the cognitive capacity to recognize the dangers of deployment, impacts of transitions, and consequences of the lifestyle characterized by frequent upheaval.

Additionally, the factors that influence a military child's cognitive development may differ from location to location. For example, The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) Blueprint for Continuous Improvement emphasizes the use of 21st Century learning environments and stresses the importance of leadership, abstract concepts, and innovation.¹⁰ Conversely, Elgin Public Schools near Fort Sill, Oklahoma applies a more traditional approach to learning. A key example of learning challenges between these schools is the difference between the Singapore mathematics model found in DODEA schools and the traditional mathematics model taught at Elgin Public Schools.^{11,12} This change in location/schools can negatively affect children's cognitive development by causing confusion due to inconsistent learning methods despite both being effective if applied consistently throughout schooling. Ultimately, military youth are more susceptible to the psychological stresses such as fear and anxiety because of the critical cognitive development period combined with the inconsistencies associated with a military lifestyle.¹³

The psychological effects of cognitive development during late childhood and early adolescence has a secondary impact on emotional development.¹⁴ Emotional expression is highly apparent during this period of youth development because it "is characterized by the establishment of realistic and coherent sense of identity while learning to cope with stress and manage rapidly fluctuating emotions."¹⁵ According to the Milburn and Lightfoot (2013), self-concept is "the set of beliefs, qualities, and abilities one has about oneself, whereas self-esteem involves a value judgment by evaluating how one feels about one's self-concept."¹⁶ The recognition of one's position within the family, school, or system is analyzed through developed cognition, which forms a self-concept that leads to his or her self-esteem. While common in all youth, this volatile period provides increased risk to military youth because of a lack of a stable

system. Furthermore, military children experience higher rates of mental health problems than those not associated to the military.¹⁷ Cederbaum et al. (2013) collected data as part of the California Healthy Kids Survey and “suggest that military-connected adolescents have much higher rates of feeling sad or hopeless than in other national studies,” emphasizing the disparity in mental effects of military children compared to non-military children.¹⁸ This developmental period focuses on social challenges outside the family and constant relocations forces a lack of stability on friendships, schools, extracurricular activities, and sports. The period surrounding relocation affects children’s emotional development by the level of the social interactions that one has outside of the family.

Social development is a commonly studied factor influencing late childhood and early adolescent growth. Expanding on the importance of social interaction beyond the family, youth in this period of development commonly place greater emphasis on peer relationships. The social networks established enable independence from the family. While current technology has increased the ability to communicate over greater distances through social media and other means, these benefits are often not available for children. Military youth during this period of development must rely on established physical social networks despite constant relocation challenges. Milburn and Lightfoot (2013) claim “healthy social development includes being able to achieve balance and satisfaction with interpersonal relationships despite the increasing complexity of those relationships.”¹⁹ Despite children’s attempts to transition to relationships outside of the family, parents continue to have strong influence in this process. Military youth face additional challenges with this process in that their parents may be unavailable due to work, deployments, and/or geographical separation. Commonly, military families attempt to maintain household and social stability of their children by remaining in one location while the service

member executes orders elsewhere. Despite the children's efforts to maintain social stability, they often lack the necessity of parental guidance and structure essential for their social development.

Children during this transitional growth period also experience significant physical development that affects their cognitive, emotional, and social development. The American Psychological Association (APA) argues, "Physical changes are a marker for a very stressful time in adolescence, when young people become very concerned about their appearance and struggle with creating a unique personal 'style' while still adhering and conforming to the norms of their peer groups."²⁰ The physical transitions of puberty for both boys and girls during this period result in cognitive and emotional challenges. Additionally, military connected children are typically diverse based on their worldwide exposure and living in multiple places, which results in a self-identity versus social immersion issue. For example, the lifestyle in Southern California is drastically different from the lifestyle in Oklahoma. Both constant adaptation to new lifestyles or maintaining a former lifestyle results in physical development challenges. As with other developmental factors, physical development demands parental interaction and communication in order to overcome these challenges.

Today's society exacerbates developmental challenges because it demands an acceleration from childhood to adulthood simply by exposure to external factors. Sawyer et al. (2018) argue that "the transition period from childhood to adulthood now occupies a greater portion of the life course than ever before at a time when unprecedented social forces, including marketing and digital media, are affecting health and wellbeing across these years."²¹ Military children undergo the same developmental challenges that civilian children experience regarding cognitive, social, and physical development. However, military children confront additional stressors such as

deploying parents, unstable friend networks, and constant relocations. These factors increase the psychological risks of military children as they evolve out of adolescence and demand parental and stable influencers to mitigate these challenges.

Over the past several decades, psychologists and counselors have studied the categories of development and translated them into policy within their respective system in order to promote healthy youth development. An understanding of historical context and past policies is essential to provide recommendations for continued support to military children. Beginning in the 1990s, DoD began to understand the increased challenges associated with the geographical transitions of military children and their impact on student academic performance, social and emotional impacts, and lack of standardization in policy. Clinicians and psychologists referred to negative psychopathological and behavioral adjustments as the “military family syndrome.”²² Researchers determined that military students struggle to adapt to new environments resulting from continuous relocations. Efforts to place increased attention on the issue originated in the 2001 publication of Military Child Education Coalition’s (MCEC) Secondary Education Transition Study (SETS). Through this directive, non-military schools received student liaison officers, who were experienced in military matters, as a resource for military children and parents during the transitional relocation period.

While the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001) had significant benefits and consequences for the civilian education system, it also deeply impacted military children because of cross-state relocations. As military children relocate to new duty stations, they are forced to conform to the new state’s educational content and testing standards, a fact that creates uncertainty and amplifies anxiety. For example, the state of North Carolina directs students in grades three through eight to pass end-of-grade requirements in only mathematics, reading, and

science²³ whereas the state of Virginia requires additional requirements. Virginia standards of learning include English, mathematics, science, and history/social science that is specific to the state.²⁴ MCEC reports that there are 1.2 million active duty military connected children and approximately 200,000 of these school aged children move every year.²⁵ Conversely, DODEA schools consistently rank among the nation's highest in categories including academics, racial integration gap reduction, and class size.²⁶ These schools are not subject to state testing requirements, but instead focus on the development of the child in areas such as critical thinking skills rather than the consequences placed on teachers and schools for poor student performance. However, more than 80% of military connected children attend local public schools and do not benefit from DODEA schools,²⁷ which enable stability in curriculum during transitions. This challenge results in a significant number of military children wrestling with the angst of varying testing requirements during continuous relocations.

Despite no change in testing requirements for public schools, DoD and national policymakers have continued efforts to mitigate the transitional challenges of military children. DoD Instruction 1342.29, signed January 31, 2017, "establishes policy, assigns responsibilities, and provides procedures to implement the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children within the DoD."²⁸ The purpose of this compact was to reduce stress on military family members during relocation by incorporating DoD funded counselors into public schools, preventing penalization for differing educational objectives regarding graduation requirements, expediting transfer of records between schools, and increasing participation in extracurricular activities and sports. All 50 states and the District of Columbia were required to honor this instruction and incorporate Military Family Life Counselors directly in the school or as part of a network of schools (county-based).

Without question, late childhood into early adolescence is a monumental transitional period for any young person. The cognitive, emotional, social, and physical developmental challenges associated with this age group demand positive influence from parents, school teachers, counselors, coaches, and friend networks. While policy exists at the national and state level to alleviate stressors, the need remains for lower level improvements to mitigate the challenges of relocation on military youth.

Stressors Affecting Military Children

Extensive research regarding the development of youth provides a baseline framework for areas of concern and potential risks for parents, guardians, and influencers. Military children face additional risk from challenges stemming from deployments and transitions: both situations that are beyond their control. In addition to the normative stressors of children in this age group, military youth experience stressors such as “extended separations from parent(s) during deployment, disrupted relationships due to frequent moves, preoccupied parents who are coping with combat-related illness and injuries, and multiple shifts in family dynamics as the family unit adjusts to service-related changes.”²⁹ To gain a better understanding of the development of coping strategies for the stressors of military children, it is easiest to categorize the strategies into distinct systems. The systems that military youth commonly partake in include the family system, the peer system, and the support system. While the factors causing the stressors are not completely eliminated so long as the service member remains on duty, coping strategies can mitigate the risks and alleviate some of the challenges.

As described earlier, the emotional and cognitive development during late childhood and early adolescence is volatile due to numerous internal and external factors. Military youth during this age group seek to explore alternatives and social interaction outside the family, which

often is not aligned with the receipt of military orders to relocate elsewhere. Additional stressors exacerbate the potential for depressive symptoms, anxiety, and self-efficacy as developmental outcomes.³⁰ Anita Chandra in *Children on the Homefront: The Experience of Children from Military Families* (2010) uses a 20-item Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to assess the emotional difficulties of military-connected youth (ages 11-17). While the focus of Chandra's report is on the impacts of deployed service members, she claims that "compared to children in the U.S. sample, the mean SDQ score for our study sample is consistently higher in each age by gender group."³¹ The Screen for Child Anxiety Related to Emotional Disorders assessment was also administered to the same population age group, but of military connected youth. The findings showed that 30% of military connected children screened had some indications of anxiety, which is 15% greater than other child studies.³² Military culture, which is often characterized by both deployments and relocation, can exacerbate a range of emotional difficulties experienced by military-connected children.

Highly mobile adolescents are more likely to be on the periphery of social networks and report having fewer closer friends.³³ A 2018 RAND study on *Enhancing Family Stability During a Permanent Change of Station*, categorized disruptions associated with moves by service member, spouse, child, and family. While this study focuses primarily on the procedures and disruptions associated with relocation, it does not address developmental or psychological implications for military youth. However, the table below recognizes important developmental factors such as changing schools, psychosocial outcomes, school performance and engagement, as well as family functioning as key disruptions that subsequently require further exploration.

Disruptions Associated with PCS Moves

Family Category	First-Order Disruptions	Second-Order Disruptions
Service member	Household management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost • Logistics of the move itself • Selling or renting old residence • Setting up a new household • Availability of temporary or installation housing 	Military life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job satisfaction • Retention intentions Psychosocial outcomes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health issues • Substance use • Social integration • Peer support • Other behavior problems
Spouse	Employment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hours worked and income • Credentialing and licensing • Educational attainment Household management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost • Logistics of the move itself • Selling or renting old residence • Setting up a new household • Availability of temporary or installation housing 	Military life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction with military life • Retention intentions Psychosocial outcomes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health issues • Substance use • Social integration • Peer support • Other behavior problems
Child	Changing schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrolling • Grade retention 	Psychosocial outcomes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health issues • Substance use • Social integration • Peer support • Other behavior problems School performance and engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance • Test scores • Grades • Homework completion
Family	Child care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost • Location • Availability • Quality 	Family functioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marital satisfaction and quality • Marital stability • Communication • Quality of parent-child relationship

NOTE: The listed categories by family member type are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Table 1. Disruptions Associated with Permanent Change of Station Moves.³⁴

Research regarding the adolescent psychological development continues to confirm that a strong family system with positive parental influence is a critical component to mitigating the vulnerabilities of stressors. In a Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health study (2010) investigating school transitions among military adolescents, researchers found a common trend amongst students is increased tension within the family upon the receipt of orders.³⁵ According to the study, the increased tension was due to uncertainty regarding the timing of moving and the impact the move would have with respect to other systems. Military families often face challenges with disruption to the family system in order to maintain stability in other systems. In order to cope with this disruption, it is important for families to maintain stability when possible. Commonly, families decide to remain in place for stability in schools, extracurricular activities, or spouse employment. However, multiple studies show that family instability is associated with

lower cognitive scores, behavioral issues, and overall health.³⁶ Military families must weigh and compare the impact on the family system compared to the impact on the peer or support system to determine the long-term developmental impacts of dividing a family due to military relocations.

While the family system is a critical component to the psychological development of military-connected youth, the peer system is essential for social development. DoD, families, and the military community dedicate significant resources to the transition of military youth from one location to another in order to ease the acceptance into a new school system and network of friends. In the same Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health study (2010) regarding school transitions among military adolescents, some of the key outputs on stress to the student's social support system were initiating and sustaining close friendships, the perception of change in their friends' behavior towards them due to the move, and the stress of losing friends.³⁷ The first two reported stressors are predictable, but the idea of losing friends is often overlooked from a resource and funding perspective. Negative outcomes for military-connected youth from relocation often means forgetting old friends to speed fitting in with new ones. However, research suggests that stability in all support systems, including peer systems, is a critical component to healthy psychological and social development. For the military connected child, common coping strategies include confiding in peers that are experienced in relocations. Military youth are frequently able to relate and share experiences regarding old or new duty stations that alleviate tension. The Military Kids Connect website offers blogs to solicit questions or concerns specific to moving. Another coping strategy that is not specific to military youth, but that can be effective is to develop an appreciation for diversity and change. In response to Jill Biden's address to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research

Association in April 2016, Harvard Graduate School of Education published the article *For Military Kids, Resilience and Challenges*, which reinforced the cautious resiliency of military connected youth within the education system. Specifically, Mary Keller of the MCEC, reiterated the importance of “school-based and district-encouraged efforts to recognize and respond - with creativity and flexibility - to the diversity of the experiences that military and- veteran-connected families bring to schools.”³⁸ Positive perspectives regarding stressful situations assists in reducing anxiety and is an important coping strategy for military youth.

The support system is another factor affecting stress on military children during relocation. Support systems include teammates, coaches, extracurricular activity instructors, teachers, counselors, or any group member. While it is true that the military is a community that provides a sense of family within, children often reach outside of the military, especially when residing off base, and become susceptible to a break in support system when a transition occurs. The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health study (2010) on transitions amongst military children addresses that one of the key challenges identified was the integration into sports teams and extracurricular organizations. From a school staff perspective, “extracurricular activities and athletics are a useful means to foster student interaction and help students feel more connected with the new school.”³⁹ However, the study also stated, “student and parent participants both reported that athletic coaches were hesitant to put military students on teams- particularly in starting positions- for fear of disrupting the team or losing the starting player to a military-related move.”⁴⁰ While participation in athletics and extracurricular activities promotes inclusion within the new school, military youth are often an unknown commodity that results in positions on lower level teams. Additionally, one student in the survey described how “his school’s sports teams and division limited his ability to leverage a college sports scholarship.”⁴¹

While each of these cases are circumstantial, it is important to identify the stressors that military children face during transitions and attempt to develop preemptive measures to overcome these obstacles.

Despite the developmental challenges and obstacles military children encounter, they also possess numerous positive qualities that prepare them for adulthood. Military children often experience accelerated maturation and the ability to immerse oneself rapidly into a new environment.⁴² Constant uncertainty about the future creates anxiety and stress within the household, but it also develops resilience and the ability to be adaptable. Emphasis of these positive military youth strengths should continue as reinforcement tools to cope with stress during times of transition.

Comparison of Developmental Challenges of On Base Children and Off Base Children

Military youth residing on base subsequently benefit from “proximity resources” and naturally benefit greater than military youth residing off base. These resources include government sponsored programs such as Families Over Coming Under Stress, Community Counseling Center, and Marine Corps Family Team Building which all aim to increase the resilience and readiness of the individual, couple, or family. However, the significant disparity between school-aged children attending off base school compared to on base schools demonstrates the necessity to expand resources and support to affect a larger audience. Most DoD programs, with the exception of DODEA schools, have the ability to be location agnostic, but fall short in reaching the individual student or school. The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children provides an administrative expectation that public schools will fulfill their responsibilities, but these schools often do not have the awareness,

capacity, or expertise to implement the requirements effectively. Furthermore, military youth residing off base are subject to state education standards whereas on base students fall under different criteria in the DODEA system. Thus, the challenge is bridging the gap between achieving the same successes experienced by on base students to those residing off base.

Proximity to base is a significant factor that enables military-connected youth the ability to overcome psychological and social developmental challenges due to the prevalence of resources. Military-connected programs offered by DoD are most influential and visible on base due to proximity. For example, each military branch provides military family services aboard installations that promote a healthy military family lifestyle. These programs also support transitions, deployments, marriages, births, and a variety of other support services. The increase in deployments over the past twenty years accelerated the necessity to explore the accessibility of services to military-connected children. The National Center for Children in Poverty compiled data from several research studies that indicated “reservist families are less likely to be integrated into a military social support network, are less familiar with how to access military benefits and less likely to use installation-based services.”⁴³ Furthermore, research by Anita Chandra in *Children on the Homefront: The Experience of Children from Military Families* (2010) supports that “living on base is linked to reduced difficulties both during and after deployment.”⁴⁴ While these studies focus on the impacts to military-connected children due to deployments, they can be applied to military support systems holistically. Once a military-connected child resides off base, the proximity to the installation challenges the ability to receive the same support. For example, an active duty service member, stationed at a reserve installation or recruiting station, is physically disassociated with the services provided on an active duty installation. Similar to the examples of being physically distanced from installations due to organizational duties,

military children living off base, but adjacent to military installations, still encounter challenges in receiving the same resources as children who live on base.

The limited proportional availability of military-connected counselors is organizationally different for off base schools because its structure requires counselors positioned at the county school level vice the individual school. For example, Prince William County Schools in Virginia assigns military connected counselors, funded through DODEA, to schools with the highest military connected population and provides satellite coverage for other schools as a resource not physically at the school.⁴⁵ This county has a large military connected population, educating children with service members at Marine Corps Base Quantico and Fort Belvoir. The organizational structure of providing county-wide military connected counselors despite a large military connected population demonstrates a need to increase counselors so that they are physically at each school. Military children and parents residing off base must actively inquire and apply the resources provided by military family services in order to ensure positive social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development.

DoD and civilian organizations policies and procedures that support military connected youth has improved drastically over the past 20 years. The recognition and subsequent policies such as the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children demonstrate support to military youth development. Through MCEC, various programs such as Student 2 Student (S2S) exist to bring military students into the new school community. While administratively the resources are available, students that reside off base face obstacles in receiving effective access. Through continued increased awareness and dedicated resources to off base schools, this line of effort will continue to improve the support to military-connected youth.

New and Continued Developmental and Programmatic Strategies for DoD Leadership

Over the past 20 years, DoD has invested in the development of military youth by developing programs, providing resources, and raising awareness. Each of these programs targets the improvement to the well-being of military children who are forced into a transitory lifestyle that is not of their own choosing. While there is a significant disparity in the approach and ultimate educational objectives between DODEA schools and off base schools, most family services provided within DoD are accessible to all children, regardless of school or geographical location. However, the proximity to the resources and programs is an important factor in creating awareness and gaining access. The psychological and social development of military children yields the positive results of resilience, adaptability, effective communication, and maturity. However, many negative outcomes also exist that affect the cognitive, emotional, and social development of military children such as lack of peer stability, lack of trust, and self-confidence.

Significant research regarding youth cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development demonstrate the impact of the volatile nature of late childhood into early adolescent growth.⁴⁶ While substantial efforts are made within DoD to develop coping strategies that mitigate developmental risks and ease the stressors associated with transitions, further research must be conducted regarding the effects of loss of friendships and impacts to disruptions of former peer networks. As identified through numerous studies, maintaining established family, peer, and support networks throughout childhood and adolescence are critical to childhood healthy development. Psychologists, counselors, sociologists, and DoD leadership often focus on providing mitigation resources in preparation for the transition to the new location, but overlook the impacts that the transition has on the former relationships.

Continuation of DoD sponsored programs such as Military and Family Life Counseling program, S2S, MCEC, and DODEA must remain resourced and emphasized as critical components to the development of military youth. However, large increases to the number of military-connected counselors within off base school systems is vital. For example, Onslow County Schools near Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune is comparable to Prince William County Schools regarding county-wide military connected counselor support rather than school specific. As both elementary and middle school students experience the volatile developmental milestones, a counselor dedicated to a specific school would not only provide more direct contact, but also increases the awareness of programs and resources available to military youth who experience the challenges associated with military culture. An alternative to this model is to reorient the model to provide counselors to students rather than to schools. While this appears taxing, the application of virtual counselors, as is already conducted in the civilian sector by psychologists, would ensure continuity throughout transitions that is not available in its current structure. Military children would be afforded the opportunity to maintain a virtual counselor that can provide support at any time and in any place. This option also facilitates the low density locations. Regardless of the physical increase of military connected counselors in school systems or virtual counselors assigned to each student, resources must be provided to increase the contact between support and student in order to improve the psychological and social development of military youth.

Educational consistency continues to be a primary disparity between on and off base military youth. Due to the ability to resist state standardization, DODEA schools retain the ability to provide consistent and successful educational objectives. Conversely, the majority of school-aged children faces increased stressors of conforming to academic standards of the state

in which they temporarily reside. In order to reduce this disparity, the Department of Education and DoD must align educational objectives at the national level in order to provide consistency for transitioning students. While it is unrealistic to assume that all academic curricula can be consistent across the nation, it is feasible to provide basic standards regarding core educational objectives such as mathematics, science, reading and writing that are consistent across state. Individual state requirements such as history/social science that is specific to Virginia may increase anxiety as a new stressor and has the potential to negatively affect the psychological development of military youth.

DoD leadership must simultaneously consider the challenges associated with entering new peer networks while maintaining former peer networks. Research indicates that while military youth are concerned with establishing new peer networks during transitions, equally stressful is their loss of established peer networks. The preponderance of research and investment within DoD is focused on the former with a lack of emphasis on the latter. In order to improve peer stability in military youth, especially during transitions, the development of both digital and physical programs are required to improve and maintain communication and connectivity. Late childhood and early adolescents marks a period in which networked access is becoming increasingly prevalent.⁴⁷ Structured applications and websites that promote opportunity for military youth to maintain connectivity are critical for peer stability. More websites and applications such as the previously mentioned Military Kids Connect provide resources for military children that include moving, military life, and, health and wellness, and feelings. Enhancements to the blog format could include applications similar children social media platforms such as Facebook Kids that are military-specific and enable appropriate supervision by parents. The emphasis of this website is to provide a secure space for military

children to address challenges associated with transitions. While this program is exceptional for military youth, it does not address the loss of peer networks because it is military specific. With 80% of military connected children attending schools off base, friendships and social networks are comprised of non-military youth. Maintaining connectivity amongst former networks is a key development opportunity through applications and websites.

Maintaining physical connections of former social networks is an important component to ensuring a healthy social and emotional development for military children during transitions. Connections through the development of camps, summer programs, and athletic events would provide opportunities to reconnect military youth with either military or non-military friends. Programs such as the United Heroes League emphasize keeping children active while their parents continue to serve. Other programs such as Semper Fi Fund Kid's Camp offer retreats and camps for children of wounded or other special circumstances. While each of these programs results in a positive impact to military children, they do not address the challenge of maintaining stable peer networks. Future government funded and non-profit programs could expand upon this concept by using extracurricular activities and programs as a venue to reconnect geographically separated friendships because of military transitions.

More specifically, the creation of a government funded or grant-based non-profit program that enhances the emotional, cognitive, social, and physical development through focused initiatives could improve the well-being of military-connected children. This program could address the social and psychological effects of military culture on its children through three specific lines of effort: awareness and research, venues to provide steady and lasting relationships, and financial resources that are not otherwise available. Due to the military transitioning out of a period of conflict and high tempo deployments, projects such as this could

provide awareness to problems that are important, but lacked attention due to shifting organizational priorities. Camps and events offered by this program could provide children with a structured atmosphere to grow in the areas of sports, arts, sciences, and leadership while at the same time reuniting physically separated friendships. Additionally, through these camps and events, military children gain shared experiences by working as a team, learning coping strategies, and growing morally and ethically. This opportunity provides military children with the confidence, support, and comfort of a stable support structure despite constant relocation. Currently, the military does not resource programs that link children together from previous duty stations. Funding is key to the success of these types of projects, thus grants could provide the means to reconnect military children in a safe and enhancing environment. Furthermore, increased awareness and research, establishing venues that promote youth development, and generating financial resources enable the potential to influence positively the developmental effects military children face due to relocation.

Conclusion

The youth of today's military are adaptable, resilient, and mature. They are also highly susceptible to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. It is without question that military-connected children face heightened challenges as they progress through childhood and adolescence. Additionally, the proximity and availability to resources results in a disparity in support while coping with the developmental challenges. The volatility of late childhood into early adolescence results in cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development impacts that must continually be considered and influenced in order to ensure positive and healthy growth of our children. DoD currently offers significant, high quality resources and programs to promote low-stress transitions for military youth and provides policies that link civilian schools and

military-connected children. However, the inconsistency in the quality of education received through DODEA versus that of civilian schools is of great concern for youth development. The most significant conclusion determined from this research is the lack of research, resources, and programs provided to military youth that support stability in peer networks from previous duty stations. Research and programming that places emphasis on military youth's development of new friends, fails to consider and account for the stability of former social networks. This research indicates that importance of development of programs and resources that reconnect military children to former geographical locations in order to maintain a positive social and emotional development. The development of non-profit programs or military sponsored programs that reestablish former friendships as a result of relocation have the potential to increase social stability and ultimately improve upon the developmental impacts of military culture on its youth.

End Notes

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