

From the war zone to the home front: Risk and resilience in military families



Gabriela Misca, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Worcester, UK, discusses the lack of evidence into the impact of military life on very young children, and calls for more research to enable practitioners to provide effective and sensitive interventions.

Society asks armed forces men and women to accept 'risks to life and limb' to an extent that no other public service is required to embrace. The costs are not just borne by individuals serving in the armed forces, but also by their families and the communities they come from. 'When one family member serves, every family member serves' is not a just a slogan as, indeed, spouses, partners, children, parents, siblings, friends of the serving member are all affected to varying degrees.

In the UK, the Armed Forces Covenant (HM Government, 2014) recognises that the whole nation has a moral obligation to members of the armed forces and their families, and it establishes how they should expect to be treated. Understanding and promoting ways to address the potential impacts of the risks that serving members and their families face is a moral obligation owed by society.

Military families, where one or both partners/parents are serving in the armed forces, are a diverse population around the globe; however, compared to the general population, they face a range of unique stressors due to the serving member's career. It is generally acknowledged that certain features of military family life may act as risk factors for parenting and child adjustment such as: frequent relocations, parental absence from home during deployment, and the fluctuating dynamics between parents as they renegotiate roles during the departure/return of the serving parent.

Theoretical perspectives suggest that the military family life evolves around the 'cycle of deployment' (DeVoe & Ross, 2012) and its various stages of: pre-deployment, deployment, post-deployment/reintegration and re-deployment. It entails wide-ranging challenges to the adjustment and wellbeing of parents and children (Crech et al, 2014). For example, during the deployment phase, social isolation, anxiety about the safety of the serving partner, depression and family disruption are risks associated with diminishing the 'fitness to parent' of the stay-at-home parent (Riggs & Cusimano, 2014). Deployment, therefore, acts as an indirect risk for parenting and child adjustment, moderated by the at-home

parent's physical, mental or emotional state following separation from the partner/spouse (Trautman et al., 2015). During the reintegration process, risks are linked to the returning parent's mental health, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, injury and substance abuse (Bello-Utu et al., 2015).

Much recent research on military families has taken a deficit approach, focussing on the potential vulnerabilities deriving from military life; however, parenting and children can and do flourish in military families. In order to provide a balanced view and ultimately, to provide better services, there is a clear need to explore resilience in military families, and the sources of strength that help them cope with adversity and thrive (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). A holistic, child centred approach that takes into account factors beyond the individual and family levels, may be best placed to capture the complexity of the phenomenon of being a military child and thus better inform prevention and intervention strategies (Misca, 2014).

There is very limited research and evidence exploring risk and resilience, parenting and child adjustment in military families within the UK (White et al., 2011). This is of great concern as it hinders the development of intervention options to support military families.

It is customary in the US and something of a ritual for civilians to address veterans or current service members with the phrase: 'Thank you for your service'. This commendation acknowledges the sacrifice service men and women have made and are making. It is important that due recognition and concern are extended also to their children as they may be the invisible and unintended casualties of conflict (Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund, 2009).

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