

Afterword: What We Can Learn from Military Children and Families

Ann S. Masten

The wellbeing of military children and families in the United States has far-reaching significance for the nation as a whole, in addition to its importance for military capabilities and individual service members and their families. The articles in this issue underscore this message as they update what we know and what we need to know about the challenges and opportunities of military life for children and their families. Although military life has unique hazards and benefits, there are also many parallels in the lives of military and civilian families. Thus, the struggles and achievements of military families and the systems that support them hold valuable lessons for all of us. Based on this issue of the *Future of Children*, this commentary highlights lessons we can learn from military children and families that have the potential to help many families outside the military. It also suggests ways to build on those lessons through additional research and dissemination.

The articles in this issue are grounded in two sets of ideas: contemporary developmental systems theory and a resilience framework.¹

Central to developmental systems theory is the idea that a person's adaptation and development over the life course is shaped by interactions among many systems, from the level of genes or neurons to the level of family, peers, school, community, and the larger society. Similarly, a family is shaped over time by many interactions among its members and other systems outside the family. This issue makes clear that the U.S. military has recognized the interdependence among systems as its leaders strive to shape and retain a highly effective all-volunteer force. Across the service branches, the military has acted to improve the systems that support service members and their families. These efforts reflect the military's implicit or explicit belief that children's wellbeing influences the successful functioning of their service member parents, and that the military's collective effectiveness depends, now and in the future, on the success of the children and families who serve along with their parents, spouses, and partners.

A resilience framework has compelling advantages for understanding and promoting success in military families and organizations.

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Ann S. Masten is the Irving B. Harris Professor of Child Psychology at the University of Minnesota.

Such a framework accords well with the goals of military systems, service members, and their families, all of whom, in varying ways, share an interest in successful adaptation, resilience, and recovery in the context of challenging and traumatic experiences. When people face potentially life-ending or life-altering hazards, a resilience framework emphasizes positive objectives; building the capacity to respond effectively; the potential for recovery; and the power of relationships, families, communities, and other external resources to boost resilience, in addition to individual strengths and skills.² As a result, resilience-based approaches convey respect for human capabilities and optimism about the future, while they simultaneously recognize the suffering and devastation that can arise in situations of extreme adversity, including war.

Resilience refers generally to the successful adaptation of a system in response to significant challenges. This concept can be applied to any living organism, as well as a family, a community, a workplace, the military as a whole, a computer system, a country, or a global ecosystem. “Successful adaptation,” of course, will be defined in different ways, depending on the values, goals, culture, and historical or scientific context of the people making judgments about success. For individual children, both developmental and cultural context play a role in defining good adaptation. Developmental scientists often define resilience with respect to expected achievements for children of different ages or stages of development, sometimes called developmental tasks.³ Some of these expectations are universal, such as learning to walk or talk. Others are more specific to a culture or situation, such as learning to hunt or to read sacred scriptures in the original language. Families are often judged by how well they

promote the health, development, and goals of their members within their culture or society.⁴

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Resilience frameworks emerged from five decades of research on resilience in human development, supplemented in recent years by efforts to work across disciplinary boundaries.⁵ Resilience frameworks typically encompass, delineate, and measure the following elements: positive objectives; positive factors or assets as well as challenges or risks; positive outcomes in addition to problems; protective influences as well as vulnerabilities; and strategies of intervention that reduce or mitigate risk, build assets and resources, and mobilize protective processes to promote resilience and recovery.

Research on disasters, wars, and terrorist attacks has underscored how systems are interdependent when they respond to life-threatening events.⁶ Adaptive capacity for resilience is distributed across systems. For example, a community’s resilience depends on the resilience of its constituent members as well as the capacities of larger emergency response systems. A family’s resilience depends on the resilience of individuals within and outside the family as well as support systems in the community and beyond. Children’s resilience depends on the adaptive functioning of their own internal

systems as well as interactions among many other systems in their lives. Disasters often bring a catastrophic breakdown of many interacting systems at many levels of scale, and the interdependence of systems that support everyday function and emergency response become evident. Failures at one level can cascade to affect other levels. Similarly, the capabilities and resilience of military service members, units, and organizations as a whole depend on the adaptation of many other interconnected systems, including service members' families.

Resilience researchers have studied how children and families respond to many kinds of adversity, including mass trauma (for example, war, terrorism, or natural disaster), situations arising within a family (for example, child maltreatment or domestic violence) or a neighborhood (for example, poverty or high levels of violence).⁷ Their work has yielded extensive evidence that can guide efforts to promote resilience. At the same time, we need to keep building a solid knowledge base about what works in specific situations for specific individuals, families, or systems, and when. The reviews in this issue make clear that programs developed within the military have benefited from resilience concepts and studies. It also is clear that research on those programs has already contributed to the knowledge base on risk, resilience, and recovery and that it could contribute even more substantially. In many respects, the military's goals, resources, and organizational systems offer a unique opportunity to enhance resilience science and its applications for the common good.

The first section of this commentary focuses on the challenges of military family life and lessons from efforts to address those risks. The second section highlights the

opportunities of military life for children and families. The conclusion summarizes the potential of research on both naturally occurring resilience and interventions that promote resilience in military families to inform theory, practices, and policies on the development and promotion of success and resilience in all families and their children, as well as military systems.

Challenges Unique and Shared

Military children and families face unique hardships, such as deployment of a parent to a war zone. But they also share many challenges in common with other American families, including the struggle to find child care, make ends meet, or educate and discipline their children. Military families also share some challenges, such as frequent moves, with specific groups of civilians. Even in the case of relatively unique job hazards, the effects of adversity on military families—in the form of loss, stress, conflict, or suffering—may be very similar to effects on civilian families that stem from different causes. Therefore, all families can benefit from knowledge drawn from military families about how adversity and stress affect the family, how to protect children and their development, and how to foster healthy family function. Moreover, as Anita Chandra and Andrew London emphasize in their article, the contributions from research involving military children and families can be enhanced by careful attention to measurement, sampling, comparison groups, longitudinal design, and other methodological considerations that improve the quality of the data as it accumulates over time.

Moving and Mobility

Moving is a central feature of military family life. Military families typically move every

two or three years, considerably more often than civilian workers of the same age.⁸ As many authors in this issue have noted, frequent moves create both challenges and opportunities for families. Children may face separation from parents or extended family, changes in day care or school, disruptions to friendships or other social ties, the loss of opportunities tied to a particular place, discontinuity in health care, and the stress of adapting to a new context. They may also experience indirect effects from the stress that moving places on their parents and other family members. Moving can also bring a financial burden, interfering with a family's efforts to build equity in a home or reducing employment or promotion opportunities for a spouse.⁹

From general studies of moving and academic achievement, there is considerable evidence that changing schools and homes can take a toll on learning.¹⁰ However, the context is important. Moving associated with poverty and homelessness is a major risk factor for achievement problems, whereas moving related to better family opportunities appears to be less harmful.¹¹ Nonetheless, for children in military families, moving poses a number of widely recognized hazards for academic success, ranging from problems with transferring credits to constraints on opportunities for special programs.

Studies reviewed in this issue and elsewhere delineate educational hurdles that children in military families face, but they also document solutions, and these could prove helpful to other mobile populations.¹² For example, the Department of Defense Educational Activity (DoDEA) schools on bases or military posts have a uniform curriculum to foster educational continuity as students move from base to base.¹³ Furthermore, the Military Child

Education Coalition (MCEC), a nonprofit organization, has worked with the military to develop programs that target some of the most common problems standing in the way of school success for military children.¹⁴ These include "Student 2 Student," which helps students acclimate to their new schools, and an initiative called "Living in the New Normal: Helping Children Thrive through Good and Challenging Times," which provides training and resources to help communities support military families more broadly.

DoDEA schools are regarded as models of excellence. But large numbers of military-connected students—the children of Guard and Reserve members, as well as children of active-duty service members who don't live on or near a military base—have little or no access to DoDEA educational services. They are scattered all over the country, and they often attend schools with few other military-connected children. School and state policies can interfere with their academic success, for example, through policies about transferring credits. Over the past five years, the Department of Defense (DoD), the MCEC, the Obama administration, and the Department of Education have worked together to reduce such barriers and provide resources to support the academic achievement of military children throughout the country.¹⁵ One product of this collaboration has been the development of an Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. The Compact, which as of this writing has been signed by 46 states and the District of Columbia, aims to reduce barriers and facilitate achievement among military children by tackling issues such as placement, transfer of records, access to special programs and extracurricular activities, and on-time graduation.

Another broad initiative that bolsters educational success in military families is the military's commitment to high-quality child care for military families. Stable access to high-quality early child care and education is among the best investments any community or society can make in the academic success of its children and the quality of the future workforce.¹⁶ In their article, Major Latosha Floyd and Deborah Phillips note that the military's child-care initiative is widely heralded as a model for the nation in promoting access and quality. Again, however, the most extensive and effective programs are on military bases, and the DoD is still striving to meet the extensive needs of military families who live away from military installations. The military's efforts in this area reflect the growing awareness that quality child care not only promotes children's competence and school success, but also the work effectiveness of their parents. Moreover, because a substantial proportion of military children grow up to serve in the armed forces themselves, the military is likely to reap the benefit of its investment in child care along with the larger society.

Solutions to other problems that frequent moving poses have garnered considerable attention in military families and among those concerned with their success. One focus has been employment resources for spouses (for example, the Military Spouse Employment Partnership and My Career Advancement Accounts).¹⁷ Participants say they like these programs, but, as Molly Clever and David Segal note in their article, we need more research about the effectiveness of these programs beyond satisfaction ratings. Such programs could help us develop evidence-based practices that could be applied to people in civilian jobs with high relocation demands.

The Internet has given us an entirely new set of education resources that may hold special potential for mobile students. Many of the efforts described above that aim to facilitate learning and reduce educational barriers for military children depend on online technology. We need to identify the most effective uses of Internet-based technologies for the education of all children, including military and other mobile children.

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Similarly, we have very little evidence about whether social media can be a resource or protective tool for military families. Social media are transforming the way people stay connected and making it possible to maintain and develop relationships across the globe. We need research on whether and how social media can ease the hardships that military families face, such as frequent moving and separation during deployment.

Separation and Reunification

Military family life includes cycles of separation and reunification related to deployment or training. These separation-reunification cycles are not common among civilian families, although neither are they unique to military life. Deployments to war zones,

particularly multiple deployments, pose particular hardships for military families.¹⁸ This issue documents both direct effects on children, such as emotional suffering, and indirect effects, through the stress that deployment places on both the deployed parent and the parent who remains at home.

The evidence summarized in this issue shows that the impact of separations, reunification, and deployment follows a cumulative risk pattern of dose and response.¹⁹ Multiple and prolonged deployments generally have worse effects than fewer and shorter deployments. Families who already struggle with emotional, relationship, or financial problems are more affected than families who function well before deployment. The returning parent's postdeployment functioning also plays a major role in the dose-response picture. A wounded, disabled, depressed, or traumatized parent creates additional challenges for the family during reintegration and recovery. These patterns of dose and response bear a striking resemblance to those observed in the broader research on extreme adversity and disaster.²⁰ At the same time, research suggests that certain fundamental protections can help families over the course of separations and reunifications. These protective factors include individual know-how and self-regulation skills, the quality of relationships among family members, and the social support and other community resources available to the family. Some of the most effective postservice supports for military service members and their families are concrete resources, including financial benefits and access to health care.²¹ However, other, less tangible forms of support may play an equally powerful role in the resilience of military service members and their families. These include perceptions of broad societal appreciation for the value of military service,

pride in contributing to an important mission, a sense of belonging to a military culture, and awareness that support from communities of care will not cease when active service ends.²² Some investigators have attempted to quantify these intangible but powerful belief systems in military families, but this is an area ripe for additional research.

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We would also expect developmental timing to play a significant role in the way military children and families confront and adapt to challenges, just as it does in the broader research on risk and resilience.²³ For example, deployment can come at a bad time for a family if it means missing or disrupting developmental milestones that happen only once in a child's life (first word, walking, confirmation, graduation). Bad timing of this kind can generate stress in different ways on all members of a family, including children as they grow older.

Separation's effects on children also vary markedly by age and development. A very young infant is unlikely to be aware of separations except indirectly through the effects on the at-home caregiver. As Joy Osofsky and

Lieutenant Colonel Molinda Chartrand note in their article, toddlers and preschoolers may experience acute anxiety when separated from primary caregivers, followed by symptoms of loss and depression, as a result of disturbances to the attachment system.²⁴ Children in this age group may be particularly vulnerable to separations because they are old enough to suffer from separation and loss but not old enough to have much coping ability, and they need adequate surrogate caregivers. Older children also suffer from the stress, sorrow, or anger engendered by separations, but they have more coping capacity and the ability to take on responsibilities in the absence of a parent. For older children and youth, added responsibilities can have positive effects on their own perceived competence or maturity; on the other hand, a child may feel burdened with excessive or inappropriate responsibilities. Older children also have greater awareness of dangers and the struggles of the parent left at home.

The Zero to Three (ZTT) organization and the Sesame Workshop have focused on the special needs of very young military children.²⁵ The ZTT has made a concerted effort through an initiative called “Coming Together Around Veteran Families” to respond to the needs of veteran families with young children, providing materials and guidance. The Sesame Workshop has created a series of multimedia materials entitled “Talk, Listen, Connect” that feature the popular Muppet character Elmo, among others. These materials help young children and their families through the stories of characters who are coping with deployment and reunification, or a parent’s injury or death.

The developmental timing of family stress is important even for unborn children. An emerging issue that has great potential

significance for military policy concerns the effects of a pregnant woman’s stress during pregnancy on the developing child, which I discuss below in the section on stress.

Reintegration puts additional strains on family life.²⁶ Children and spouses may be very relieved and happy to have a parent or spouse safely back home, yet the whole family system must readjust. The DoD is funding research to adapt family interventions that have been shown to work for other populations for use with military families. For example, researchers are evaluating a program called “After Deployment: Adaptive Parenting Tools” (ADAPT), a military-tailored version of Parent Management Training–Oregon model (PMTO), one of the best scientifically verified parenting programs available.²⁷ The military version is designed for families with a service member returning from deployment; it uses some web-based training, and includes a team with at least one service member to facilitate parent groups. Osofsky and Chartrand describe ADAPT and other efforts by the military to tailor evidence-based practices for the military. The lessons the military gleans by adapting evidence-based programs and evaluating them through randomized controlled trials should help us learn how best to adapt and scale such interventions for other populations as well.

Injury, Disability, and Death

War and military service have always carried the risk of physical and mental harm, which can have devastating effects on children and families. U.S. military operations since 9/11 have produced large numbers of casualties, including visible and invisible injuries, life-altering disabilities, and deaths.²⁸ (Of course, many nonmilitary families experience death, injury, and disability as well.²⁹)

These tragic consequences of war and military service affect children and families in many ways. Injuries can change a parent in the short term or permanently, altering the quality of parenting as well as children's sense of emotional security. Chronic strains on the family, whether from changes in the wounded parent or the stress of caring for an injured family member, can undermine parenting and family systems or drain energy and emotional stamina from even the most capable parents or spouses. Bereavement can be complicated by depression or resettlement. Family finances can suffer. All of these problems generate stress on the family, which can interfere with multiple aspects of family function that support child development. Thus, it is not a surprise that research on children and families exposed to these adversities has found elevated symptoms and problems.³⁰

But research with military families confronting difficult injuries and losses has also revealed resilience in many families, who carry on effectively or recover adaptive function in their roles at home and at work.³¹ The resources and protective factors that military families tap to bolster their resilience in the face of injury and death are similar to those that many other families use.³² They include strong relationship bonds among family members and other relational support; at least one capable parent or parent surrogate; positive attitudes and identity; positive beliefs about the meaning of life and service; and community support.³³

Supporting children and families after a parent's injury or death has become a high priority of the U.S. military, spurring rapid implementation of programs intended to help. But the speed and scale at which such programs have been introduced have precluded "gold-standard" research to test for

efficacy.³⁴ Some efforts were built on evidence derived from research with nonmilitary families, while others were created from scratch. As the urgent need to help families in crisis recedes with the drawdown of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, the numerous programs developed for military children and families could be tested, compared, and evaluated more thoroughly to build a better evidence base about what works best, for whom, and in what situations.

Stress and Resilience

Each of the challenges discussed above can generate enormous stress on a family system and the individuals within it, including service members, other parents, children, and extended family. Anticipating and managing stress is thus central to maintaining the effectiveness of military forces and the well-being of their children and families. Military systems collectively have made impressive strides in recognizing the toll that cumulative stress takes on service members and on their families. This issue describes numerous solutions developed to reduce stress, prepare soldiers and families to handle stress, provide support to counter and ameliorate stress, and transform military systems to promote competence and resilience in children and families, as well as in soldiers.

At the same time, our knowledge of the neurobiology of stress and resilience is expanding rapidly. Growing evidence suggests that prenatal exposure to stress can alter fetal development in ways that impair long-term health, and there are increasing worries about how toxic stress affects brain development.³⁵ Research indicates that prenatal stress and the timing of traumatic experiences, such as a terrorist attack or natural disaster, can alter stress-regulation systems

and possibly other systems in the developing fetus, with potentially lifelong consequences.³⁶ Moreover, increasing evidence suggests that some individuals are more sensitive to both bad and good experiences, and thus more affected both by adversity and by positive interventions.³⁷ Given the central importance of promoting resistance to stress and resilience in military families, further research on stress and resilience in these families should benefit military and civilian families alike.

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Opportunities and Personal Growth

Despite the challenges of military life, joining the military has long been recognized as a path to a better life for young people, especially those from high-risk backgrounds.³⁸ The military gives many young men and women economic, occupational, educational, and personal opportunities. Their children, present and future, stand to benefit from these opportunities indirectly, because the achievements of the people who are or will become their parents enhance the economic, human, and social capital of the families who rear them.

Children who participate in military life also have direct opportunities that are spelled out in this issue. Some attend the model child-care programs or schools that the military provides. Some have the opportunity

to experience diverse cultures, not only through the diversity of other children who are part of the military, but also by living in different cultures or countries. Traveling and exploring the United States and the world can be exciting for children.³⁹ Military children make friends with children from very different backgrounds and learn new languages. In the midst of the challenges they face, military children can also take on manageable responsibilities that can enhance their sense of efficacy and promote their personal development.

Many children also develop a strong sense of identity as part of the military.⁴⁰ At its best, military culture offers a powerful sense of belonging that transcends place and engenders pride in service along with patriotism. Life in the military can also foster the skills to handle moves or separations, adjust to new schools, and understand other cultures—skills that can come in handy later in life. The nature of military life offers a wealth of opportunities to conduct research on how young people build competence and how change affects children's development.

Conclusions

Research on military families and the systems that serve them not only can contribute to basic knowledge about stress and resilience, but can also help us create practices and policies that promote positive development. The potential benefits extend well beyond the military and its members to society at large. The U.S. military is in a unique position to back longitudinal research (that is, research that follows a group of people over time) on competence and resilience, as well as high-quality intervention research, including randomized controlled trials, to determine the best ways to promote positive adaptation

in the context of frequent moves, separation, injury, loss, and other hardships shared by many military and civilian families.

The scope of the military's systems, its logistical expertise, the diversity of its members, and even the cultural diversity of the different service branches offer a multifaceted context for research and innovative programming to solve some of the most important issues of our times. These include the delivery of quality health care, child care, education, and opportunities to a diverse population of individuals and families. Even hardships that are more salient in military than in civilian life on the whole—such as moving, deployment, or injury in the line of duty—have considerable relevance for substantial subpopulations in nonmilitary society.

The military also has the motivation, resources, and scope to identify the practices and interventions that work best to reduce stress and promote resilience, and to test their adaptability and scalability. By insisting on quality, the military raised a banner for excellence in early child care and education on bases. The success of that work is spreading beyond military installations as the military reaches out to help military families who don't have access to on-base services. Other domains of family life also hold the potential for innovative leadership by the military. These include efforts to prepare in advance for separations and major stress, to harness the power of the Internet for innovation in education, to mitigate the long-term health consequences of prenatal stress, and to support families through periods of acute distress and prolonged recovery.

The military's efforts to promote competence and resilience in the lives of military children and families underscore the following

principles and guidelines, which are highly congruent with the broad knowledge base about human development and resilience in the face of adversity:

- resilience in children and families can be bolstered in multiple ways at different system levels;
- effective strategies are well-timed developmentally and tailored to the people, the systems, and the situation at hand;
- protecting the wellbeing of parents promotes children's resilience, and, concomitantly, thriving children promote the work competence and resilience of their parents;
- the presence of a well-functioning caregiver has powerful protective effects on children;
- family separations should be minimized in length and frequency;
- all personnel who engage with children and parents in any way need basic training in child development, child responses to trauma, and protective factors for children and families;
- cultural rituals, practices, and routines, including play, school, and religious practices, support resilience; and
- children in families that are emotionally, socially, and economically secure are likely to weather adversity very well.⁴¹

The solutions emerging in the military to promote healthy families and child development herald a fundamental transformation in thinking and practices with respect to sustaining military preparedness and excellence. This transformation not only emphasizes resilience, it also recognizes that

effective engagement with families is essential to building resilience throughout the military. The limited evidence to date suggests that this transformation is going well. Certainly, the evidence justifies additional research to gather more and higher-quality

data. Moreover, the potential benefits for the nation as a whole are compelling. Finding what works among military families to promote resilience and protect child development may have profound significance for the future of all American children.

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