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Research Brief

The Children of Military Service Members: Challenges, Supports, and Future Educational Research

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Research Highlights:

- Students from military families are currently under a tremendous number of stressors stemming from the longest war in American history.
- Child maltreatment and mental health studies show negative psychological outcomes for both military parents and children in the Iraq and Afghanistan context.
- There is a lack of studies that assess the role of supportive and responsive school environments on the outcomes of military children.

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Abstract:

“The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have led to concerning psychological, behavioral, and academic outcomes for children in military families. Of the 1.2 million school-aged children of military service members, only 86,000 actually attend schools administered by the Department of Defense on military installations throughout the world. The remaining military children attend those administered by civilian public schools, private schools, and other civilian-run educational agencies. At present, there is a knowledge gap in educational research regarding military-connected schools and students. Given the lack of educational research on military children, the primary objective of this review is to outline findings from non-educational disciplinary empirical literatures that are of direct relevance to schooling for educational researchers who want to conduct studies on military-connected schools and students. The authors reviewed studies on military children and their families that examined links between special circumstances and stressors, as well as outcomes that are known to impact students’ school experiences.

A synthesis of literature generated six themes: mental health in military families, child maltreatment, the impact of deployment on military children and families, the reintegration experience, war-related trauma of the returning veteran parent, and the experience of Reservist and National Guard families in civilian contexts. The article concludes with a heuristic model for future educational research, including linkages to school reform.”

Implications

For Practice

There is a variation in mental health of military families between the pre- and post-Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In general, research has suggested in the pre-Iraq and Afghanistan wars context that the prevalence rate of mental health problem in military families is similar or lower than civilian families, while in the post-Iraq and Afghanistan era, military families experienced a higher rate of mental health issues compared to their counterparts. Besides the difference of war context, other socio-ecological risk factors also matter in impacting their mental health, including prolonged parental absences, isolation from the civilian community, frequent moves, and the uncertainty surrounding the potential loss of a family member. This finding implies that in treating the mental health problem of military families, practitioners should understand military-specific stressors and propose culturally-appropriate treatments.

Similarly, recent research has indicated that military families have experienced an increased rate of child maltreatment during the post-Iraq and Afghanistan period compared to the pre-Iraq era. Several characteristics are associated with child maltreatment, including military service member's rank, degree of social isolation, domestic violence, lack of access or utilization of mental health supports, and the gender of the military service member. Therefore, providing social supports such as military-specific social services and school supports to military families with child maltreatment is necessary. It is notable that deployment of military parents has a negative impact on military children by imposing an emotional and physical separation and changing household roles and responsibilities, which results in negative academic, social, emotional, and behavior outcomes of children. Researchers suggest that emotionally supportive social contexts (i.e., family, community, and military installations) help military children manage deployment-related stressors. Another finding suggests that reintegration could be another period filled with new demands and stressors due to the lack of mental preparation and psychological adjustment of military parents, especially for those with PTSD, which calls on practitioners' special attention.

As researchers identified, war-related trauma is prevailing in returning veteran parents and this kind of trauma is likely to transfer inter-generationally to their children. Therefore, supporting these veteran parents and their children by treating their traumatic symptoms is very crucial. As a special group, National Guard and Reservist families have experienced major demographic shifts with the military entering into an all-volunteer forces period. Mental health issues of children from these families differentiate from other military branches as well as civilian families. Schools and society should be aware of this problem and offer necessary support to this group.

For Policy

The authors of this study note that military researchers have not yet examined the role of supportive school environments on the social, emotional, and academic outcomes of military children. A heuristic model shows how policymakers and school reformers can address the needs of children of military service members. First, educational policy makers need to further develop the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. This policy addresses the challenge of school transitions by allowing the educational policies of one state to apply to the schools of transferring military children in other states. This includes policies such as graduation requirements, Advanced Placements, and age of student enrollment. Second, the authors recommend that educational policymakers and school reformers include military children in policies and reforms addressing diversity in schools. This includes the systematic and anonymous identification of military children in public schools, so that school leaders and staff are aware that a certain proportion of military children attend their school. This assists in funding decisions, applying for Impact Aid, and curriculum and instructional decisions. Third, this review suggests that educational policy focus more on the social and emotional qualities of a school environment. In the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) context, schools have generally focused on leveraging the academic outcomes of historically underperforming student populations (i.e. students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and African-American students). In turn, they have adopted academic interventions to address their learning needs. However, these interventions ignore the social and emotional challenges that they experience in multiple contexts and that influence their academic functioning. School climate reform can help address the outcomes of military children and other student populations experiencing tremendous daily stressors.

For Future Research

More researchers should focus on the contextual factors influencing military-specific risk issues, family and community supports, and the social, emotional, and psychological development of military children. First, researchers could examine the relationship between historic, demographic, and structural variations in society and military families and the variation of behavioral outcomes of military children over time. Also, longitudinal and controlled approaches that measure academic performance of military children should be explored to give a clearer picture of the factors to the effects of child maltreatment on schooling among military and nonmilitary families. Moreover, future studies should look into the experiences of military families during reintegration as well as the different experiences of military families across branches. Finally, future researchers should investigate more variables related to academic and school organization that influence the performance of military children. For example, researches on military-connected schools can examine how principal leadership, civilian peer awareness and support, teacher awareness and support, and a supportive school climate influences the academic, social, and psychological outcome of military children.

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