

Meeting Family and Military Needs Through Military Child Care

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Readiness and retention outcomes were assessed along with three “intermediate” child care outcomes believed to influence readiness and retention: unmet need for care, unmet preference and use of multiple arrangements.
- Survey results revealed that child care is an important readiness and retention issue. More than half of military mothers were late to work at least once in the previous month because of child care issues. Child care kept a significant fraction of single parents and dual military families from reporting for duty after a permanent change of station. Twenty percent of all families with children, and an even higher percentage of families with children under six reported they were likely or very likely to leave the military because of child care issues.
- The military would benefit from examining unmet needs, unmet preferences and use of multiple child care arrangements through family surveys. Ideally, survey responses should be linked to personnel records to help identify whether child care issues are affecting retention and other key readiness outcomes. These data would help military officials to better leverage available resources to optimize outcomes for the military and for families.

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ABSTRACT:

“This article summarizes results from a child care survey of military families conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2004 and draws policy implications for the military child care system. The article describes the military child care system, discusses the policy objectives of the system, and summarizes survey results that clarify the degree to which the Department of Defense is meeting its child care goals. The authors find evidence that despite its high quality, the military child care system fails to optimize readiness and retention of military members because these goals do not drive system policies or operations. The article offers suggestions for improving system outcomes.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Previous research has shown spousal employment and child care issues to be important factors in military retention. Over the past 40 years, an increase in the number of women and military personnel with family obligations has led to many changes in the military child care system, with grassroots efforts in the 1970s resulting in the enactment of the Military Child Care Act (MCCA) of 1989. Today, the military child care system provides affordable, high-quality care, with approximately 176,000 spaces available for military children ages six weeks to 12 years. Care is provided in child development centers (CDC), family child care homes (FCC), youth centers and other after-school programs. CDC care is heavily subsidized by the Department of Defense (DoD) and remains the most sought-after type of child care among military families because of its low fees, reliability and perceived safety. However, many families were unaware of these CDC subsidies, which fund more than half the cost of care. In fact, some family members believed that the DoD was making a profit from CDCs. Both the DoD and military families would benefit from increasing awareness of CDC subsidies, the total cost of care and the fact that parent fees in CDCs cover only a fraction of the cost. Given their appeal, many CDCs are oversubscribed, which creates long waiting lists. Even those who secure a CDC space may need additional care because military work hours often extend past CDC hours of operation. FCCs offer families flexible and extended hours of care; but far lower subsidies, more safety concerns and dependence on a single individual make FCCs a far less attractive child care alternative. The DoD might want to promote use of FCC providers through larger, targeted subsidies, provide more FCC system oversight and consider other ways to meet family and military needs.

FOR POLICY

The military child care system fails to optimize readiness and retention of military members because these goals do not drive system policies or operations. Policy changes such as much higher FCC subsidies, vouchers for subsidized civilian slots, subsidized wraparound care and sick child care may improve these critical military outcomes. Readiness and retention outcomes were measured along with three “intermediate” child care outcomes: unmet need for care, unmet preferences and use of multiple arrangements. Survey results revealed that child care issues influence the ability of military members to report for duty after a permanent change of station, and that child care is an important readiness issue that affects both military fathers and more often, military mothers. Families with pre-school aged children were much more likely to report a propensity to leave the military due to child care issues than families with school-aged children. Twenty percent of families reported they were likely or very likely to leave the military because of child care issues; families with children between the ages of zero to five and dual-military parents were much more likely than other parents to consider leaving the military because of child care concerns. Half of military mothers report being late to work and 30 percent report missing work because of child care issues. Single parents reported long search times for child care and difficulty reentering the child care system after deployment. Families using CDC care, regardless of family type, are more likely to indicate that child care issues may lead them to leave the military. The DoD may want to consider other ways to support these parents, perhaps by offering and subsidizing a larger range of child care options, including wraparound care and subsidies for civilian care. To better use child care as a readiness and retention tool, the DoD needs to better understand parental use and concerns about care options, then devise and implement new child care system policies and programs that better meet the needs of military mothers and fathers.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The data were collected in 2004 and may not be generalizable to military families today. New developments since then include: a 24-hour resource and referral service called Military OneSource, and special programs targeted at activated or deployed Guard and Reserve members, deployed active duty personnel, and personnel who live in areas where on-base care is not available. Still, these options mainly target on-base child care programs, which do not always meet the needs of military families, especially those living off-base. Intermediate outcomes discussed in this article need further investigation; family surveys, ideally linked to personnel records, would help to clarify which intermediate outcomes are most relevant and help the DoD leverage available resources to optimize readiness and retention. One such policy consideration might include exploiting FCC care through targeted subsidies and more DoD oversight of options available to military families. Another would be to provide families with more options for meeting their child care needs, such as wraparound care. Further research is also needed to determine whether individuals with the propensity to leave the service due to child care issues actually do so.

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