

Impact of Social Networking Sites on Children in Military Families

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ABSTRACT

“Youth in military families experience a relatively unique set of stressors that can put them at risk for numerous psychological and behavior problems. Thus, there is a need to identify potential mechanisms by which children can gain resiliency against these stressors. One potential mechanism that has yet to be empirically studied with military youth is social networking sites (SNSs). SNSs have gained significant popularity among society, especially youth. Given the significance of these communication tools in youths’ lives, it is important to analyze how SNS use may affect military youth and their ability to cope with common military life stressors. The current review examines the potential positive and negative consequences associated with SNS use in coping with three common stressors of youth in military families: parent deployment, frequent relocation, and having a family member with a psychological or physical disability. By drawing from SNS and military literature, we predict that SNS use can be a positive tool for helping children in military families to cope with stressors. However, certain SNS behaviors can potentially result in more negative outcomes. Recommendations for future research are also discussed.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Other researchers have extensively studied adolescents’ and teen’s use of social networking (e.g. Facebook, or twitter). However, no studies have examined how social networking affects military-connected children psychologically and socially. McGuire and Steele review past research on the use of social networking sites among adolescents and military-connected children. Using the review, the authors predict how using social networking sites might impact the psychological and social development of military-connected children.
- The use of social networking sites by military-connected adolescents could present several benefits, such as creating and maintaining connectedness to peers and family members. The sense of connectedness that occurs through using social networking sites may positively impact how military-connected adolescents deal with stressors related to relocation, family deployment, and familial injury.
- More research is needed to clarify the impact of social networking use on military-connected children, particularly factors which may encourage resiliency. More research is also needed on how excessive use of social networking sites might negatively affect military-connected adolescents by increasing their risk for depression and poorer academic achievement.



IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Military-connected adolescents who are relocating to a different school should consider using social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Using social networking sites could help military-connected children adjust to a new school in several ways, including connecting with new classmates and remaining in touch with former classmates and friends. Military-connected adolescents should consider remaining in contact with close friends, which can help to decrease potential feelings of isolation that can be associated with having to relocate. Connecting with new classmates prior to transferring schools could help reduce anxiety for many military-connected adolescents. Military-connected families should consider joining groups on social networking sites where they can talk with other families about strategies to ease relocation stressors. Parents currently on a military tour should consider using social networking sites to maintain communication with their children. In addition to social networking sites, military families should also use email to remain in contact with each other. Military-connected adolescents and their parents should consider using social networking sites to connect with the child's new teacher(s) and learn more about the learning curriculum. Teachers should consider using social networking sites and email, including school provided sites to stay connected with current and future parents and students. Educators should familiarize themselves with the experiences of military-connected children.

FOR POLICY

The Department of Defense (DoD) might research how a service member's use of social networking to communicate with family impacts both their job and morale. Using this research, the DoD might implement initiatives that help service members remain connected with their family and friends while optimizing their ability to serve. To further help military-connected children successfully transition between schools, the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) and policymakers might continue supporting initiatives that help military-connected families adjust during and after a relocation. The DoDEA and policymakers might continue allocating funds to the implementation of social programs that support military families, especially those that facilitate the social growth of military-connected children. To help teachers understand the difficulties military families might encounter during a relocation, the Department of Education (DOE) might provide K-12 teachers with training on military relocations.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

More research is needed on how military connected children use social networking sites. Future studies should collect information on which sites military-connected children use and find most beneficial and how military-connected children use social networking. It might also be beneficial to collect information on time military-connected adolescents spend on social networking sites. Since past studies have found that social networking increases in times of stress, studies on military-connected children and social networking sites should study how stressful events, such as a parent's deployment and return home can affect the amount and type of social networking that is done. Future researchers should determine if the use of social networking sites during stress events is a positive coping mechanism or if it leads to problematic behavior, such as cyberbullying. Future researchers should examine how social networking affects the overall mental health of military-connected children and parents. Futures studies should examine how the use of social networking sites impacts military-connected children perceptions of themselves. Additional research should study how different forms of communication impact interactions between military-connected children and their families. Researchers should study the design any community-based programs currently utilizing social networking to connect military-connected children with each other. Studying their design would provide a greater understanding of the real world application and implementation of social networking by military families.

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