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# A Qualitative Assessment of Military Kids: Instabilities & Constants

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## Introduction

- There are approximately **1.2 million** children who have at least one parent in the military (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 2013).
- Children of military personnel spend an average of **1/5 to 1/6 of their lives** with at least one parent **deployed** (Mustillo, Wadsworth, & Lester, 2015).
- **Timing** of parental deployment during child development seems to be the best indicator of how the child will **cope** and **adapt** long term, with later deployments having a greater impact (Mustillo, Wadsworth, & Lester, 2015).

## Method

- We conducted 21 semi-structured qualitative interviews.
- Participants were asked a variety of questions focused on three central constructs regarding their military experience: **Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive** Differences.
- Interviews were then **transcribed** and **open coding procedures** were applied.
- Researchers here only report themes that were related by **most participants**.
- The codes fell into **three** larger categories. This presentation focuses on one of the themes: **Instabilities** and **Constants** in the lives of military Children.

## Participant Demographics

- Children of military personnel in **four branches**: Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine Corps.
- Criterion included:
  - Parents were deployed at least once for over **two months**
  - Parents had to be active duty for at least **10 years** during the child's lifetime.
- Students were volunteers from a private university in Ohio.
- The average **age** of the participants was approximately **20 years old**.
- The average number of moves during the parent's military career was **six**.
- The average time spent **living in a single place** during the parent's active duty military career was a little over **five years**.
- Several participants stated that their time at **college** (4-years) was the **longest** that they had ever lived in one place.

## Results

### • **Childhood Instability**

Military Kids expressed having a hard time connecting with people who had a **stable upbringing**. They could not imagine experiences such as living in the same place their whole life, having friends from childhood, and not traveling all the time. They have come to **expect continual changes**, because that is the only life that they have ever known.

*"I can't imagine growing up in one place and living in the same house for my entire life!"*

*"... oftentimes I feel like I don't have a home because we're moving so much."*

*"I don't put roots down as deep...because if you have too deep of roots when you pull them up it just hurts."*

### • **Adaptability**

The military kids believed that they had learned how to be **flexible, adaptable** and **cooperative**. Due to short-notice deployments, international moves, and unexpected changes, adaptability had reportedly become a **mindset** and a **way of life** for these military kids. Many of the study's participants shared how they have seen this adaptability **carry over** into their **adult** lives.

*"I'm 4,000 miles away from home and I'm okay with it."*

*"... a toughness to be like, 'Okay I'm ready for this!' or 'I can do this.'"*

*"I feel like I'm a lot more flexible than I would be."*

### • **Constants**

Although there were many instabilities and situations that the children had to adapt to, they also mentioned several communities that remained a **constant** regardless of **circumstance** and **location**.

#### ○ **Family**

Many of the participants stressed that, despite the instability of their childhood, they always knew that they could **count on** their family to be there for them. One major theme was that the moves and deployments caused their families to **come together** to work as a **unit**.

*"Your family is the one thing that really stays constant through it all."*

*"Moving a lot, we were looking for something that was stable, and family is."*

## Results (cont'd)

### • **Constants (con't)**

#### ○ **Family (cont.)**

*"When you move around so much your really good friends have to be your family because they're the only ones who are staying around the whole time."*

#### ○ **Military Community**

Participants also discussed that they felt connected with the military community as a whole. They felt that only other military kids could really **understand** them and **relate** to their struggles. They expressed that being **connected** within the military community was important so that they could be **supported** by people with **similar experiences**.

*"[The base school had] a better sense of belonging because you were with your people."*

*"I think you just kind of lean towards them [military kids] because they know you and you know them... they know what it's like, you know what's it's like..."*

## Implications

### • **Military Kids**

- Although the moves are often inconvenient and unpleasant, help military kids use their situations to develop, both personally and corporately as a family.

### • **Military Families**

- Help military kids to become **connected** with other military families. It is important for them to find friends who **understand** what they are going through. Having a family in a similar situation can provide a natural **support system**.

### • **Military Authorities**

- Provide **opportunities** for families to connect within the military community. Creating a **fun** and **inviting** events may encourage participation and also help form **lasting bonds**.

## References

- Mustillo, S., Wadsworth, S., & Lester, P. (2015). Parental Deployment and Well-Being in Children: Results From a New Study of Military Families. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*. Retrieved from <http://ebx.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/09/15/1063426615598766.full.pdf>
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