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Children in Military Families More Likely to Have Problems

Written by Chuck Green | Published on August 17, 2015



Researchers have found some children from military families have a higher likelihood of substance abuse, violence, and weapon-carrying.



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As a clinical psychologist, Ingrid Herrera-Yee is surprised by the findings.

As a mother of three, whose husband has served 14 years in the military, she's also saddened.

According to an [article published today](#) by JAMA Pediatrics, children with parents or caregivers currently serving in the military have a higher prevalence of substance use, violence, harassment, and weapon-carrying than their nonmilitary peers.

While most young people whose families are connected to the military demonstrate resilience, war-related stress inducers can contribute to struggles

for many of the children, according to researchers.

Those stressors include separation from parents due to deployment, frequent relocation, and the worry about future deployments.



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Study Looked at California Children

In the study, researchers looked at data collected in 2013 from secondary schools from every county and almost all school districts in California.

Kathrine Sullivan, M.S.W., of the University of Southern California School of Social Work, Los Angeles, and colleagues analyzed the data that included 54,679 military-connected and 634,034 nonmilitary-connected secondary school students from public schools.

Students defined as military-connected had a parent or caregiver currently serving in the military. Latino students were the largest percentage of the sample at 51 percent. Overall, almost 8 percent of children reported they had a parent in the military.

Researchers said military-connected students reported higher levels of substance use as well as violence, harassment, and weapon-carrying compared with nonmilitary-connected students.

For example: 45 percent of military-connected youth reported lifetime alcohol use compared with 39 percent of their nonmilitary-connected peers.

Slightly more than 62 percent of military-connected students reported physical violence compared with 51 percent of nonmilitary students.

Results Described as ‘Disturbing’

“There’s not enough research on military kids overall, particularly among those with parents who’ve been deployed,” said Herrera-Yee, who is also a military spouse advisor for the [Military Family Advisory Network](#) in Arlington, Virginia.

She’s worked with military families for more than a decade.

“It looks like this particular study is finding some issues around alcohol use — which I’ve not seen before — and smoking, violence, and carrying a weapon at school. It’s so very disturbing but very important work,” she said.

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More Research, Assistance Needed

More initiatives within social contexts, including civilian schools and communities, to support military families during times of war are likely required, according to researchers.

Herrera-Yee said while the study makes it sound like kids who are struggling “are struggling in significant ways,” it’s key to remember the findings are based on a specific sample in one state.

“*These studies help shine a light on what might be going on with our military kids.*”

Ingrid Herrera-Yee, clinical psychologist and military spouse advisor

“[Still], these studies help shine a light on what might be going on with our military kids,” said Herrera-Yee, whose husband has served in the Army and the National Guard.

Herrera-Yee said her children, ages 5, 9, and 14, have handled aspects of military

life relatively well, although her oldest seemed somewhat down when her husband, Ian, was deployed.

“But we were lucky because we were in a military-affiliated school. All the kids were aware of deployment and what it’s like,” she said.

One thing that helped her son was his participation in a lunchtime group at school. There, students talked to each other about missing their parent.

“It helped him get through the deployment and served as a buffer. He got better,” Herrera-Yee said.

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How to Overcome the Problems

How do military parents overcome the issues raised in the study?

It’s not easy on the parent left behind, said Herrera-Yee.

“That spouse has to be present, but it’s difficult because, as the remaining spouse, you’re having a hard time, too,” she said.

Nevertheless, it’s important “to hold it together, for your kids’ sake,” she emphasized. “Make sure they have a strong social support network which, as the adult, you need as well.”

She also suggested keeping in touch with everyone involved in your children's lives.

“The more support a child gets, the less likely they are to use some of these more negative ways of coping,” she said.

Some Limitations on Data

The authors noted the data they were using was cross sectional and therefore causation cannot be established.

Herrera-Yee expanded, saying the researchers basically used a “convenience sample,” which is not representative enough of the total population.

The children also were from civilian, rather than Department of Defense schools, where different factors could be at play. Furthermore, only 8 percent were military affiliated children, which is a small percentage, Herrera-Yee added.


“So there are problems, some weaknesses with that, but it's still important information to have,” she said.

Whatever the case, Herrera-Yee said, she's “hoping [the findings are] some sort of anomaly.”

“But even if they're not,” she added, “this shows that more work needs to be done and we need to advocate for more help for our kids. Only then can we learn how to moderate the effects of over 14 years of war on our children.”

“ *This shows that more work needs to be done and we need to advocate for more help for our kids.* ”

Ingrid Herrera-Yee, clinical psychologist and military spouse advisor

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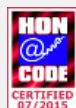
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