

Caring for Each Other, Together and Apart

Military Families in Canada

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Today's Forces are acknowledging and actively working to support military families as they fulfill work, community and family responsibilities within military culture.

Over 57,000 families in Canada have a mother, father, daughter, son or several family members serving in the military. These military families are directly affected by the duties and commitments of military personnel and by the unique workplace experiences and challenges they face. The impact that military culture has on the life of a military member – and by extension, his or her family – is a big part of what makes life in a military family so unique.

Portrait of a modern Canadian military family

Specifically, military families are a direct reflection of the mutually reinforcing nature of the relationship between the “military” and “family” – as one changes, so does the other. The past military families were composed largely of a military father and a stay-at-home mother. These families tended to live together as neighbours on a military base in a PMQ (Permanent Married Quarters), where understanding came through shared experience and support was often close at hand. Today, more than one out of 10 military spouses is male, nearly half of all military spouses have full-time jobs and women comprise 12% of the Canadian Forces.^{1,2}

These changes have compelled a “revisioning” of family and family life within the Canadian Forces. Today's Forces are acknowledging and actively working to support military families as they fulfill work, community and family responsibilities within military culture.



Resiliency, flexibility and adaptability

Adaptation is the hallmark of life in a military family. Military families do the usual work of caring, providing, parenting and nurturing, only they do so while also navigating frequent relocations, temporary housing arrangements, spousal unemployment or underemployment, family separations, deployments and the long and unpredictable work hours of military personnel. Fulfilling family obligations and meeting the needs of individual members in this context of continuous change is both exhilarating and exhausting.

Janice³ is married to a soldier who makes time every week to record a short video message on her phone for their twin boys: “He does this so that I will always have video footage of him if he were to leave on short notice. This way, when he returns, our boys, who are only two, will remember him as their dad because they were able to see and ‘talk’ to him every night.”

Living together and apart

Living apart is a nearly universal military family experience. At some point, military members are either deployed or called to serve away from the family, or a family might be relocated to a new home away from friends, extended family and community supports. This call can come at any time and often with little notice. A 2009 report found that 77% of surveyed spouses married to a military member reported experiencing deployment at least once, while approximately one-quarter experienced the deployment of their spouse more than four times.

This can pull family closer together or push them apart. In families with more than one serving military member, the challenges are magnified.⁴

Relocating together and apart

Some military families experience relocation *while* their military family member is deployed, meaning the family must move without the support of the deployed military family member.

On average, relocation (also known as “getting posted”) occurs every two to five years, giving military family life a unique rhythm and history anchored by a changing landscape. With the news of relocation comes the busyness of finding a new home, a new school, a new doctor, new employment and, of course, a new community of friends and supporters.

Working together and apart

When entire families move to accommodate the job demands of a military member, the impact on a spouse can be heavy. Oftentimes, military spouses have difficulty finding employment and maintaining career momentum. For some, it can feel a bit like an uphill battle. Rachel, the working wife of a Commanding Officer reflects, “When people say to me, ‘You’re so driven! Why are you not a manager?’ I try and explain to them that it is because I start back at zero every time we move.”

The increasing number of military spouses pursuing their own careers means new questions are being asked by families when the call to relocate comes, namely, “Who is going and for how long?”



With two career paths to navigate, it is no longer a given that an entire family will follow a military member to a new posting.

For those who do relocate, securing employment can be complicated by finding child care, meeting new language requirements, learning new cultural norms and responding to concerns about long-term employability and reliability from employers who may view a military spouse as a job “flight risk.” For some, the challenges are insurmountable and lead to either unemployment or underemployment in lower paying and lesser qualified positions.⁵

Adventures together and apart

For some children, moving to a new city, province or country holds the promise of new friends and new adventures. For others, the prospect of moving, perhaps “again,” can be very unsettling.

To minimize the potential anxiety that moving can evoke, many families try to involve the children as much as possible in the move. Some families make it a practice to bring their children to look at different houses and to learn about possible schools, community groups and after-school activities in advance. Not only does this help excite and prepare children for what lies ahead, it also serves to normalize a fundamental aspect of life in military families: mobility.

When asked to reflect on a childhood spent as a military “brat,” adults often reminisce about how it had been challenging at the time, but admit that it has made them a stronger person. By accessing the supports of various community-based services, families find ways to navigate the requirements of mobility while supporting the healthy development of all family members.

Parenting together and apart

Developing effective routines, expectations and communication skills are essential tools for any family. For military families, the unpredictable pattern of separation, relocation and reconnection can make maintaining stability and harmony difficult. This is particularly true for military parents who experience what is commonly referred to as “serial single parenting/ grandparenting” created by the intermittent absence of one or both partners.

When “serial single parenting/grandparenting,” the parents/grandparents left behind face the challenge of maintaining a consistent set of parenting and family norms and expectations on their own. In addition, efforts to maintain a



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new order can be frustrated when the military member returns home and roles and responsibilities are reassigned.

Caring for each other, together and apart

Working to dismantle the myths and misconceptions associated with the military and a military lifestyle is an essential part of supporting military members and their families. While all familial arrangements require accommodations and compromise from each family member, examining the unique familial arrangements required of a military family provides each Canadian the occasion to gain a better understanding of some of the opportunities and challenges associated with life in a military family.

Vicky Snyder was the Military Families Initiative Project Coordinator at the Vanier Institute (January–August 2013).

¹ Julie Coulthard and Jason Dunn, *Canadian Forces Spousal/Partner Employment and Income Project: Research Framework and Methodology* (2009), accessed October 29, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1dlpBUh>.

² National Defence, *Women in the Canadian Forces* (2013), accessed October 30, 2013, <http://bit.ly/yAtSjw>.

³ The names used in the article are not necessarily the real names of the contributors.

⁴ Kerry Sudom, *Quality of Life Among Military Families: Results from the 2008/2009 Survey of Canadian Forces Spouses* (August 2010), accessed June 4, 2013, <http://bit.ly/14J1oqP>.

⁵ Coulthard and Dunn.