Research Recap: School Experiences of Children in Military Families

Emily Beckett
The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada. The Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on and are affected by social, economic, environmental and cultural forces.

Vanier Institute of the Family
94 Centrepointe Drive
Ottawa, Ontario K2G 6B1
613-228-8500
www.vanierinstitute.ca

© 2018 The Vanier Institute of the Family

Readers are free to reprint parts of this publication as background for conferences, seminars and classroom use with appropriate credit to the Vanier Institute of the Family. Citation in editorial copy for newsprint, radio and television is permitted. However, all other rights are reserved and therefore no other use will be permitted in whole or in part without written permission from the Vanier Institute of the Family.

How to cite this document:
Research Recap: School Experiences of Children in Military Families

Emily Beckett

There are more than 64,000 children growing up in military families in Canada.¹ Many of these children experience high mobility, as studies show that military families move three to four times more often than their civilian counterparts.² While most military families are highly adaptive and resilient during relocations, a growing body of research has found that these frequent moves can have an impact on family well-being.³

While frequent moves can affect multiple aspects of family life, some research suggests that the greatest disruption on youth is related to school and school-related activities.⁴ Parents in military families are aware of these disruptions, with more than half (54%) of surveyed military spouses agreeing that “military children are at a disadvantage because civilian public schools do not understand military life.”⁵ However, research also shows that a child’s school environment can facilitate the transition and have a positive impact on the well-being of youth in military families.

In recent review of available literature, School Participation and Children in Military Families: A Scoping Review, Heidi Cramm, PhD, and Linna Tam-Seto, PhD(C) explored existing research on how transition affects the well-being of children and youth in military families with regard to school participation. Through an examination of 112 academic articles, they found that experiences common in military families, such as separation from a deployed parent, relocation, parental deployment in dangerous conflict situations and changes to family dynamics during and after deployments, can all shape the quality and quantity of children’s participation in school-related activities. While the vast majority of the articles in the literature review are based on U.S. data, military families in Canada seem to share many of the same experiences and concerns, as reflected in data from the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Community Needs Assessment: 2016 Overall Results report.⁶

Resettling into a new community takes time

While starting at a new school doesn’t necessarily mean a child from a military family will experience academic difficulties, research in the literature review suggested that it takes students approximately four to six months to academically re-establish themselves each time they move. Though this period is temporary, these disruptions can have a long-term effect on opportunities later in life, specifically in regard to a child’s willingness to take risks or pursue challenges.

Based on the predominantly American research, Cramm and Tam-Seto noted that difficulties in transition among students were found to be associated with the duration of deployments (total number of months that the child’s parents are away on deployment), the mental health of the non-deployed parent and decreasing resiliency.
Research also acknowledges the potentially difficult period of reintegration of a military member into family structures and routines after their deployment. Given that there is some evidence that the accumulation of months deployed is associated with these types of negative effects, it will be critical to determine what the experience is for military families in Canada.

**Academic experiences and access to supports can be impacted by military life**

Cramm and Tam-Seto found that students in the research, who were primarily from U.S. military families, can experience negative impacts on their academic performance (e.g., academic gaps and redundancies) when they move across jurisdictional boundaries: factors such as standards, credit requirements and the age of kindergarten can change from region to region. They also found that stress at home during deployment and reintegration can often affect in-school behaviour and class dynamics, as these students may act out emotionally and experience difficulties with concentration, anxiety and conflicts with peers. Though the survey doesn’t specify whether the problems exhibited in the children of the respondents to the CAF Community Needs Assessment were associated solely with mobility, 13% of respondents reported that their child exhibited emotional or behavioural problems at school in the past year. Further research is needed to provide a greater understanding and focus on military families in Canada.

Studies found an association between behavioural and emotional adjustment and academic performance (e.g., conduct, attendance, attitudes toward school and approaches to learning). The difficulties associated with transitioning to a new school can be compounded when a student requires access to special education resources. Many of the 8.2% of surveyed CAF families who report having children with special needs require access to resources and supports, and the process of accessing them can be disrupted with every move.

Like any family with a member with special needs, many military parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can face difficulties navigating health care and education systems, not only to acquire appropriate resources but to secure assessments and diagnoses as well. Obtaining a diagnosis can be difficult as families can spend months or even years on a wait-list, which can result in military families relocating before they receive care or services.

Many special education resources cannot be accessed without a diagnosis, and Cramm and Tam-Seto found that schools may delay providing resources based on the assumption that a student’s academic struggles are related solely to military life or a temporary reaction to a deployed parent. Alternatively, special education resources are occasionally provided rather than taking the larger step of addressing gaps in education due to relocation. Many U.S. school staff report that they feel unable to appropriately identify students in military families for clinical referrals.

**Building community in the face of high mobility**

Research shows that in the context of high mobility, military students can experience difficulties initiating and maintaining meaningful personal relationships and building social circles with children their age. Many civilian peers may not understand or be able to empathize with parental deployment or frequent moves, which can have an impact on relationships with military children. Social connections between military and civilian youth are common, since 85% of military families in Canada now live off-base in civilian communities, compared with only 20% in the mid-1990s.
Cramm and Tam-Seto found that children of military families living in U.S. civilian communities are particularly vulnerable to feelings of isolation and loneliness – important measures, since the connection between strong social networks and well-being has been well established in research. Conversely, research shows that a sense of community belonging can be a factor in protecting mental health and enhancing resiliency.

Participation in extracurricular activities can be affected by mobility among youth in military families. For example, opportunities for a child in a military family to sign up for a soccer team may have passed by the time they move, as the tryouts may have already been held and the team was set before the beginning of the academic year. Higher levels of sports teams or leadership programs may pass over military students to avoid complications that could arise if the student needs to relocate again.

The 2016 CAF Community Needs Assessment report found that among respondents who cited their child’s well-being as the most significant problem in the past year, nearly three in 10 (29%) reported requiring help with activities (e.g., bolstering fitness, stress relief, family bonding) to aid in the child’s well-being. Circumstances may not allow a parent to organize transportation to extracurricular activities or manage without the student’s support at home due to increased child care responsibilities during parental deployment, as 23% of all respondents reported experiencing issues with child care, such as quality, distance, expense and hours of availability.

**Educational professionals have unique opportunities to facilitate transitions**

Research suggests that teachers, counsellors and other educational professionals have unique opportunities to facilitate transitions for military youth. American research in the review suggested that the school environment can act as a protective factor during relocation, and that educators can support students in military families by strengthening the child’s resiliency and adaptive coping skills.

Due to the inherently disruptive nature of relocation and the potential loss of stability and routine in their lives, military families and students can be particularly reliant on school personnel and structure for social and emotional support. Among surveyed CAF parents who selected child well-being issues to be the most significant problem in the past year, more than one-third (34%) reported requiring emotional or social support. When families are able to get involved in their child’s schools, studies suggest it can enhance school engagement, academic success and their likelihood of graduating and pursuing post-secondary education.

However, Cramm and Tam-Seto also found that many U.S. educational staff report feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of their students’ needs and struggle to deal with military family-specific issues, such as repeated transitions, parental deployment, fear of death or injury of a deployed parent, and how to meet those needs and communicate effectively with military families.

While many of the studies and research explored and cited by Cramm and Tam-Seto were from abroad, the findings are important in better understanding military families in Canada, who share many of the same “military life stressors” as their American counterparts – in particular, high mobility, frequent periods of separation and risk. The research in this scoping review study suggests that schools and educational professionals with a high degree of military literacy (awareness of these stressors and military family experiences) can play a major role in facilitating transitions among youth. Canadian-specific research with school communities will be important in the coming years.
Resources and information facilitate support for military youth

Enhancing military literacy among educational professionals can play an important role in supporting military youth and their families, and many have expressed a desire for resources to help them with this goal. Resources such as School Counsellors Working with Military and Veteran Families, published in 2017 in collaboration with the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association and the Canadian Military and Veteran Families Leadership Circle, can play an important role in creating and strengthening “military-literate” teams of school counsellors (and their colleagues) in schools across Canada by providing information about the military and Veteran lifestyle and sharing tailored resources.

Military and Veteran families are strong, diverse and resilient, and they make unique and valuable contributions to communities across the country. Many experience high mobility, which affects the well-being of military-connected children and youth, and, in turn, on the well-being and operational effectiveness of serving CAF members. Enhancing understanding of their experiences and the “military lifestyle” among educational professionals and others who study, serve and support families will be key to ensuring that communities and workplaces are inclusive environments in which these families can thrive.

Read the full study:

Emily Beckett is a professional writer living in Ottawa, Ontario.
Published on May 22, 2018

This article was reviewed by Col. (retd) Russ Mann, Special Advisor to the Vanier Institute of the Family and former Director of Military Family Services, as well as Heidi Cramm, PhD, and Linna Tam-Seto, PhD(C).


3 Learn more with A Snapshot of Military and Veteran Families in Canada.

4 Sudom, 2010.


8 Cramm, 2016.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.


15 Ibid.
The Vanier Institute of the Family
94 Centrepointe Drive
Ottawa, Ontario  K2G 6B1
Canada
Tel.: 613-228-8500
info@vanierinstitute.ca
www.vanierinstitute.ca

L’Institut Vanier de la famille
94, promenade Centrepointe
Ottawa, Ontario  K2G 6B1
Canada
Tél.: 613-228-8500
info@institutvanier.ca
www.institutvanier.ca

© 2018 The Vanier Institute of the Family / L’Institut Vanier de la famille