

Resilience among Military Youth

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Summary

Much research on children in military families has taken a deficit approach—that is, it has portrayed these children as a population susceptible to psychological damage from the hardships of military life, such as frequent moves and separation from their parents during deployment. But M. Ann Easterbrooks, Kenneth Ginsburg, and Richard M. Lerner observe that most military children turn out just fine. They argue that, to better serve military children, we must understand the sources of strength that help them cope with adversity and thrive. In other words, we must understand their resilience.

The authors stress that resilience is not a personal trait but a product of the relationships between children and the people and resources around them. In this sense, military life, along with its hardships, offers many sources for resilience—for example, a strong sense of belonging to a supportive community with a shared mission and values. Similarly, children whose parents are deployed may build their self-confidence by taking on new responsibilities in the family, and moving offers opportunities for adventure and personal growth.

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drew more and more service members into combat, the military and civilian groups alike rolled out dozens of programs aimed at boosting military children's resilience. Although the authors applaud this effort, they also note that few of these programs have been based on scientific evidence of what works, and few have been rigorously evaluated for their effectiveness. They call for a program of sustained research to boost our understanding of military children's resilience.

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Nearly two million children and youth are growing up in military families in the United States.¹ When it comes to resilience, we know relatively little about how these young people are similar to, or different from, youth who grow up in civilian families. The military life presents young people with many opportunities, but they also face hardships that other children don't experience. To ensure that these young people thrive in the face of such adversities, the military and other organizations have developed prevention programs to help boost their resilience. These programs may indeed foster resilience, but the research evidence is thin. Ultimately, programs and policies should be supported by research that demonstrates their effectiveness.

In this article, we present our approach to understanding resilience among military-connected young people, and we discuss some of the gaps in our knowledge. We begin by defining resilience, and we present a theoretical model of how young people demonstrate resilient functioning. Next we consider some of the research on resilience among children and adolescents in military families, and we examine programs that may promote resilience among military youth. Finally, we suggest how the theory and research we discuss can guide policy makers and practitioners as they work to protect and promote resilience the next time our nation is at war.

Defining Resilience

Resilience is sustained competence or positive adjustment in the face of adversity. Resilience allows people to recover successfully from trauma, or maintain appropriate or healthy functioning even when they are under considerable stress.² The relations between

an individual and his or her context produce resilience; in other words, resilience involves a fit between a person's individual characteristics (for example, health or talents) and supportive features of his or her environment (for example, family, school, or community).

Resilience should not seem exotic or unusual. Indeed, Ann Masten describes it as "ordinary magic," underscoring the fact that individuals and their contexts typically possess the components and processes that can produce resilient functioning.³ But how humans respond to adversity can vary tremendously. If we understand the processes that underlie this variability, we can better support efforts to help young people adapt and thrive. We believe that the processes of resilience operate in the same way for military-connected young people as they do in the civilian population, although the stresses that military-connected young people face, and the contexts in which they face them, may sometimes be unique.

Resilience as a Relationship

Resilience is neither a personal attribute or trait, nor something that is present in a young person's environment. Rather, resilience comes from interactions between people and their environments as part of a "dynamic developmental system."⁴ Thus resilience is not static; it can change across time and situations. For example, a youth who is struggling with a parent's deployment may show resilience at school, participating and maintaining high grades, and yet may suffer emotionally, with symptoms of anxiety and depression. Further, a child may demonstrate resilient functioning during one parental deployment but may struggle with the next one. In our view, the interdependent, two-way relationships between military-connected young people and their environments, which affect

resilience, are not distinct from the relationships involved in human functioning in general.⁵ In this way, military-connected young people who cope well with the challenges of military life (for example, frequent moves or deployed parents) are similar to civilian youth who cope well when they face other kinds of stress (for example, chronic illness, parents' divorce, natural disasters). Resilient relations occur when we maintain or enhance links that are mutually beneficial to individual young people and to their contexts.⁶

Resilience comes from interactions between people and their environments.

To understand resilience among young people, we need to know:

- the fundamental attributes of individual children or adolescents (for example, features of cognition, motivation, emotion, physiology, or temperament);
 - the status attributes of youth and adolescents (for example, age, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, geographic location);
 - the characteristics of the young person's context (for example, family composition and cohesion, neighborhood resources, social policy, community economic resources, historical time frame);
 - the facets of adaptive functioning (for example, maintaining health; active, positive contributions to self, family, community, and civil society); and
- the specific nature of the events or challenges they face (for example, a parent's deployment, moving to a new home).

Later in this article we more fully describe relational developmental systems theory, which lies behind our approach. Relational developmental systems theory is at the cutting edge of developmental science today.⁷ We believe that this approach to studying resilience in military-connected youth will both enhance our understanding of this understudied group and serve as an excellent example of how we can apply developmental science to promote positive youth development in general.⁸

Stress and Resilience

Because, by definition, resilience means to adapt positively to adversity, it is important to note the relationship between adversity, or stress, and resilient functioning. From early childhood through adolescence, young people manifest developmental plasticity, which includes changes in their neural connections, modified by the environment; features of their own cognitive structure; attributes of their behavioral repertoire; and characteristics of their relationship with their context. Developmental plasticity ensures that resilience is dynamic rather than static. However, this plasticity is a "double-edged sword";⁹ it creates both opportunities for resilient functioning and vulnerabilities. We know that not all children and youth are equally (or identically) influenced by environmental stresses or supports.¹⁰ The way stress affects children and adolescents varies according to the nature of the stress (for example, acute and short-lived vs. chronic and extended), the individual (for example, temperament, intelligence, enjoyment of challenge, age-related coping strategies), and the context

(for example, family finances, parents' mental health, community youth development programs).¹¹ Some sources of stress may be unique to military-connected young people, for example, the deployment cycle. But in most ways, the stresses young people experience, and the ways they respond, are more similar between civilian and military-connected youth than they are different.

We may think of stress as harmful to children, but it can have positive, health-enhancing effects.¹² Edward Tronick, observing how infants learn to regulate stress as they grow older, noted that "normal" stress helps babies develop coping strategies that increase their capacity to adapt well to future stress.¹³ Others refer to "steeling," or "stress inoculation"; Margaret Haglund writes that "exposure ... to milder, more manageable forms of stress appears to aid in building a resilient neurobiological profile."¹⁴ What critical features—of individuals, contexts, and their interactions—determine whether stress promotes healthy development or hinders resilient functioning?

According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, stress may be positive, tolerable, or toxic.¹⁵ Positive stress is typically brief, causing moderate physiological responses (that is, a faster heart rate; higher blood pressure; and a mild rise in cortisol, a hormone produced by the adrenal gland when a person is under stress). Positive stress, according to the council, "occurs in the context of stable and supportive relationships"; such relationships help "bring ... stress hormones back within a normal range" so that children can "develop a sense of mastery and self control." Tolerable stress (triggered by, for example, parents' divorce or natural disaster) may last longer and have more serious consequences that alter children's daily routines.

Still, it has a beginning and an end, and it occurs in the context of supportive connections to emotionally and physically available adults whose protection helps children regulate stress. Toxic stress is most likely to be prolonged, repeated, or extreme (for example, chronic family violence, recurring maltreatment, or persistent and severe poverty). When toxic stress is not accompanied by effective, supportive adult relationships, it may disrupt the child's stress-regulation systems by keeping him or her chronically activated.

Whether stress is positive, tolerable, or toxic can depend on many factors. Among young people in military families, stressful circumstances, behaviors, and experiences that would produce tolerable or even positive stress in one situation—before a parent's deployment, for example—might produce toxic stress at another time. Imagine, for example, how hard it could be for a child already burdened with ADHD to complete difficult yet routine school homework after a parent returns from war with a traumatic brain injury or posttraumatic stress disorder. Physiological responses to stress that produce positive adaptation in small doses, or under controlled circumstances, can be emotionally and physically taxing if they are chronically activated. Cumulative exposure to toxic stress, and exposure during sensitive periods (particularly during the fetal stage and during periods of rapid brain development in early childhood), have been linked to adult health and disease.¹⁶ Even when stress is toxic, supportive parenting, positive peer relationships, and the availability and use of community resources can foster positive adaptation.

Positive stress, on the other hand, is a catalyst for the kind of positive growth that may be called "thriving."¹⁷ The key to thriving is finding the optimal conditions to support

Table 1. The Seven C's Model of Positive Development**Competence:**

Youth need the skills to succeed in school, in a future job, and in a family. They also need peer negotiation skills to safely navigate their world and coping skills to avoid risks and recover from stress. Adults can model skills and notice, reinforce, and build on existing competencies. Adults undermine competence when they view youth as inherently problematic, or try to “fix” situations rather than guiding young people to find their own solutions.

Confidence:

Confidence may be developed through demonstrated and reinforced competence. Adults can help youth gain confidence by noticing and reinforcing their existing strengths. Confidence may be an important starting point for positive behavior because a young person who lacks confidence may be demoralized and cannot imagine taking the steps necessary to make wise decisions.

Character:

Character is about understanding behavioral norms, recognizing the others' perspectives, seeing how your behavior affects other people, and having moral standards and self-awareness. Perseverance, tenacity, and “grit” are other key character attributes associated with long-term success.

Connection:

A meaningful connection with at least one adult (more is better) is a core protective factor. Young people will be resilient if the important adults in their lives believe in them unconditionally and hold them to high expectations.

Contribution:

Youth who possess the protective attributes associated with Confidence, Competence, Character, and Connection are poised to make Contributions to their families, communities, and society. Experiencing the personal rewards of service may make them more comfortable asking for help in time of personal need. And youth who contribute will be surrounded by appreciation, rather than condemnation or low expectations.

Coping:

Children who learn to cope effectively with stress are better prepared to overcome life's challenges. A wide repertoire of positive, adaptive coping strategies may offer protection against unsafe, worrisome behaviors. In primary prevention, children and families develop positive coping strategies they can employ when most challenged. In secondary prevention, people already engaged in worrisome behaviors consider replacing those behaviors with others that will also reduce stress, but will do so safely and productively. Adults, especially parents, need to model appropriate coping strategies.

Control:

Control (or self-efficacy) is about believing in your own ability to avoid risky behaviors in the face of temptation. Having a sense of control over one's environment leads to having the capacity to act independently and is related to a sense of purpose/future. Discipline should teach that a child's actions lead directly to outcomes, and demonstrated responsibility should be rewarded with increasing trust and privileges). Parents who make all of their children's decisions deny them opportunities to learn self-discipline and self-responsibility. Parents can teach and model self-control and delayed gratification.

Source: Kenneth R. Ginsburg and Martha M. Jablow, *Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings*, 2nd ed. (Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011).

positive stress.¹⁸ Research shows that people who experience controlled exposure to stress in childhood and adolescence cope better as adults with circumstances such as bereavement, moving, illness, and job or relationship trouble; for example, they have fewer mental health problems.¹⁹ In fact, military personnel and first responders, among others, go through controlled exposure to stress as part of their training.

A Model for Positive Youth Development: The Seven C's

We have mentioned that resilience results from two-way interactions between individuals and their environments. Similarly, the Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective states that thriving (positive and healthy functioning) occurs when a young person's strengths as an individual are coupled with the resources in his or her environment.

There are several models of how PYD works.²⁰ The Five C's model, derived from the work of Rick Little by Richard Lerner and Jacqueline Lerner, has been studied the most.²¹ According to this model, which has been refined over the years,²² young people who develop high levels of a set of five interrelated qualities are most likely to show resilience and thrive. In 2006, the American Academy of Pediatrics published a guide that translated the best research about PYD and resilience into practical advice for parents.²³ Because the Five C's are practical, actionable, and empirically verified, they formed the core of the AAP model, but Kenneth Ginsburg suggested adding two more qualities, for a total of seven: Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection, Contribution, Coping, and Control. Table 1 presents a brief summary of the Seven C's model.

Given that all children and adolescents can develop resilience,²⁴ developmental science aims to identify the individual and environmental conditions that reflect resilience and then apply this information in ways that maximize the chances that all youth will thrive.

Characteristics That Boost Resilience

Researchers have found many individual characteristics of children and adolescents that promote resilient functioning in the face of adversity.²⁵ Not everyone agrees on a complete list, but the following are commonly accepted: intelligence and cognitive flexibility, positive regulation and expression of emotion, an internal locus of control, personal agency and self-regulation, a sense of humor, an "easy" or sociable temperament, optimism, and good health.²⁶ These characteristics may seem like defining features of an individual, but they depend greatly on the family, social,

and community environment in which children develop.

At the family level, children who encounter adversity need supportive and sensitive adults who are available physically, mentally, and emotionally. As we noted earlier, a supportive social network can buffer stress and foster resilience. Secure attachment relationships, for example, can mitigate the psychological effects of natural disasters, community violence, and other serious stresses, such as extended separation from a deployed parent.²⁷ In addition to providing a "haven of safety and stability" in difficult times, family relationships can help youngsters make meaning of adversity, affirm their strengths, help them feel connected through mutual support and collaboration, provide models and mentors, offer financial security, and help them frame the stressful circumstances in the context of family values and spirituality.²⁸ For military-connected children specifically, family relationships might help them find meaning in contributing, as a family, to the safety and protection of the nation; they might also receive self-affirming positive feedback from parents and extended family members for taking on additional responsibilities when a parent is deployed. Thus military families may help children see their experiences as a "badge of honor" rather than a burden.

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Social support from adults can take several forms. For example:

- Parents can help their adolescent children thrive by maintaining parental authority and spending lots of high-quality time with them, combining warmth with a high level of monitoring.²⁹
- Adult mentors can boost young people's resilience, especially when they are competent, committed, and continuously present for at least one year.³⁰
- Teachers or coaches can help students succeed in school and extracurricular activities, and spiritual leaders or guides can help children make meaning of their lives.³¹

Conversely, when parents and other caregivers are overwhelmed by their own problems, they may fail to help children cope with stress.

Children's peer and school relationships, neighborhoods, and communities can also support resilience. Among school-age children, and particularly among adolescents, relationships with peers hold particular sway.³² For example, friendship can allay depression among preadolescent boys and girls.³³ When friends spend time together, they may contribute to resilience by modeling strategies for coping or sharing information about how to acquire emotional, material, and social resources.

Teachers are in an ideal position to support resilience, in part because young people spend more than 30 hours each week in school.³⁴ Classroom teachers and other school personnel may be especially important for children in under-resourced communities, and for children who live far from their extended families (like many military-connected

children) or whose mothers or fathers are deployed.³⁵ In fact, only parents have more impact on young people than supportive teachers and coaches do.³⁶ Relationships with teachers may be more important for adolescents than for younger children.³⁷

Individual characteristics and relationships that either protect children and help them thrive or expose them to risk occur in the context of the communities where they live. Recently, scholars have begun to focus not only on what communities lack in terms of resources and functions, but also on the role that a community's assets and resources can play in helping young people thrive. Michael Ungar divides these assets into five types of "capital": financial capital; human capital, that is, knowledge, health, etc.; natural capital, including land, parks, and wildlife; physical capital, such as energy, shelter, and transportation; and social capital, or networks, groups, and communal activities.³⁸ Similarly, Christina Theokas and Richard Lerner name three types of resources that can interact with young people's personal characteristics and relationships to foster resilience: institutions (for example, libraries, parks, or community-based after-school and summer programs); opportunities for interpersonal interaction and collaboration (for example, in community programs where adults and youth work together on food drives or in soup kitchens); and accessibility (for example, transportation to reach recreational activities).³⁹

Accordingly, from the perspective of Positive Youth Development, and of the developmental systems models that give rise to it, the broad presence of personal strengths and community assets means that both young people and their environments actively contribute to the developmental process. Resilience is likely to occur when young

people who face adversity possess capacities or skills that help them take advantage of the developmental assets available in their families and communities.

Research has identified many such capacities and skills. One promising characteristic is intentional self-regulation, or a person's ability to intentionally alter his or her behavior—as well as thoughts, attention, and emotions—to react to and influence the environment.⁴⁰

Young people's capacity for intentional self-regulation is a key strength, because it helps them access the resources they need to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity.⁴¹

Resilience among Military Children: What Does the Research Say?

Few researchers have used a relational developmental systems model to examine military-connected youth, their families, their communities, and the policies that affect them.⁴² Instead, research on military children has more often focused on the quality or functioning of their families, or on the risks related to parents' deployment, than it has on children's cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral strengths, or on their civic skills, competencies, and attitudes.⁴³ We have little data—for example, from long-range studies that follow military children as they grow up—that would tell us about these children's trajectories of adversity and resilience. In general, long-range studies of youth have focused on psychopathology and behavioral problems, rather than on strengths, developmental assets, or trajectories of positive development. Moreover, studies of resilience have often focused on subgroups whose experiences may be atypical, such as children of alcoholic parents or children who have been physically abused. Even when we do have data about youth in military families, many

studies were done on a small scale, making it hard to know whether their findings can be broadly applied. And studies of military-connected children have often excluded children of parents in the National Guard and Reserve, even though these parents and their children make up a considerable portion of military families.

Lieutenant Colonel Molinda Chartrand and Benjamin Siegel note that most research to date has focused primarily on children in military families during peacetime; such studies have concluded that, in the main, children respond well to moving and to separations from their parents during training, particularly when parents cope well. But even studies of children during the Gulf War of 1990–91 may be outdated. For one thing, unlike during the brief Gulf War, service members now typically experience multiple deployments. For another, technological advances have made it easier for families to keep in touch even when parents are deployed, but the impact of these technological changes has not been adequately studied.⁴⁴

What, then, does the research to date tell us about resilience among military-connected children and adolescents, or about the developmental pathways these young people follow as they face the challenges of military life? Unfortunately, the answer is very little, at best. We have only a very general depiction of military children and their families, and certainly not a representative one. To better understand resilience among military children, we need to clarify the kinds of stress or adversity they face. In turn, we must study their strengths, which have remained relatively unexamined, and how these strengths interact with the strengths of military families as a whole (for example, their ability to remain emotionally close in the face

of separation, their sense of duty, and their values). We also need to discover and assess the resources that support their positive development—in schools, in the military, and in civilian communities.

Because the research base is so thin, it's hard to reach strong conclusions about which programs and policies would best help military-connected children thrive. Indeed, any inferences drawn from these studies must be taken with a grain of salt until they can be validated through reliable, well-designed, rigorous research.

One thing, however, is certain: Military children are children first, meaning that they must do many of the same things that children in civilian families do. They must establish positive friendships and peer relationships, make their way through school, build on their talents, develop their own “moral compass,” and participate in their families and communities. But youth in military families also encounter challenges that civilian youth typically do not, such as frequent moves and parental deployment.⁴⁵

Frequent moves may undermine stable friendships and affect schoolwork and family finances. Deployment means physical separation from a parent, altered routines, new responsibilities for children, and additional stress for deployed parents and parents who remain at home alike.⁴⁶ And the periods before and after deployment may be stressful as well, as the family realigns and roles change. Family members may experience anxiety and depression at any point in the deployment process. In fact, the “deployment cycle” can be divided into five phases—predeployment, deployment, sustainment, redeployment, and postdeployment—each of which offers specific trials.⁴⁷ Families of

Guard and Reserve troops who are deployed may face their own unique sources of stress. Along with some families of active-duty service members, they may also live far from military bases and the resources those bases provide.⁴⁸

Some studies have tied the challenges of military life to problems such as depression, poor control of behavior, parenting stress, marital discord, and economic hardship.⁴⁹ Yet, when considered from a resilience perspective, the research tells us little about the strengths of military children and adolescents, partly because this research has generally not focused on how children develop.⁵⁰ For example, studies may ask participants about what happened in the past, rather than following them over time; others may have small sample sizes or rely on reports from parents (who may be experiencing stress, depression, or other mental health problems that affect their perceptions) rather than from the children themselves.⁵¹ In general, we have too few post-9/11 studies of military children, and too few that differentiate among important criteria such as whether military youth live in single-parent or two-parent families; whether their mothers or fathers are deployed; or whether children's parents are on active duty or in the Guard and Reserve.

Although research sometimes overlooks the strengths of military families, we believe that past studies still hold lessons about what promotes resilience in military-connected children. For example, circumstances that are rare in civilian life (repeated separations from parents, frequent moves) are common in military culture. As we have explained, however, how children respond to these circumstances can depend on the context. In particular, families who live on military installations may

experience less stress from these common shared experiences. For example, military-connected children who attend civilian schools may be the only children in their classroom with a deployed parent, and they may have to cope in isolation. But children who attend school on a military base may find greater understanding and empathy.

Military-connected children may also be more resilient in certain areas of their lives (for example, in academic performance, spiritual connections, and community contributions such as volunteer work) than they are in others (for example, peer relationships or emotional wellbeing). Moreover, resilience is not an “all or none” phenomenon. For example, deployment may affect children’s schoolwork more than it affects other areas of functioning.⁵² Specifically, the new roles and responsibilities that young people take on when a parent is deployed—including providing emotional and financial support for their families—may compromise their academic performance but serve as a source of strength elsewhere in their lives.⁵³

Sources of Strength

One review of research found that, compared with their civilian counterparts, military-connected youth function better than other children in several domains that help build resilience, including self-regulation, intellectual and academic performance, and emotional wellbeing.⁵⁴ Many of these studies were conducted before the current wars began; however, more recent work suggests that military youth are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and are more open to differences in other people;⁵⁵ young people can use such strengths when they encounter the adversities associated with military life.

A recent study investigated how 1,500 military-connected youth, ages 11–17, coped with deployment.⁵⁶ Two-thirds of them reported no emotional difficulties, although those whose parents were deployed longer were more likely to report problems. Looking at younger children, ages 6–12, whose Army and Marine Corps parents were currently or recently deployed, another study found that levels of depression and behavior problems among military-connected children were similar to those among civilian children in the same communities.⁵⁷ Other research has found that families with deployed parents may grow closer together, and that children in these families show more independence and responsibility.⁵⁸ These positive findings serve as a counterweight to past research that focused on problems or psychopathology in military families, rather than recognizing these families’ strengths.

Indeed, we must consider how the military lifestyle promotes positive responses to adversity. For example, military life can enhance children’s sense of community and offer a variety of cultural experiences. In fact, of the Seven C’s that promote resilience, connection may be the one most affected by military life.⁵⁹ Military families often highlight the sense of belonging and community that permeates their lives.⁶⁰ Although youth in military families may worry about moving or seeing a parent deployed, young people who have strong social connections to their parents, their peers, and their neighborhoods—as military-connected youth often do—can adjust better to such challenges.⁶¹ Young people may be more resilient when they know others who share the same kinds of stressful experiences, and know that they can count on those others to understand and lend support. Glen Elder calls this phenomenon “linked lives,” where shared experiences create

important social connections that lessen the negative effects of stress.⁶² Within the military community, this kind of support may be either informal (for example, military families sharing child care or offering emotional support to one another) or formal (for example, military-sponsored family centers, support groups, and summer camps for children).

Frequent Moves and Resilience

Military families move more often than civilian families do; for example, military-connected children in middle school and high school move three times as often as civilian youth do, on average.⁶³ Some scholars have assumed that these frequent moves put young people's development at risk. But from a resilience perspective, changing schools or towns can offer opportunities. Children who move can "reinvent" themselves; they can try out new activities, explore different social relationships, and develop new interests and talents.⁶⁴ In one study, 75 percent of military parents reported that moving enhanced their children's development, though it's important to remember that parents' reports may be biased by their own perceptions and wishes. Another study of 608 Army and Air Force families with children ages 10–17 found that certain individual characteristics and social relationships promoted resilience when a family had to move. Children who showed the greatest resilient functioning reported an internal locus of control, optimism, good physical and mental health, and a sense of mastery (which may reflect skill at intentional self-regulation). They also tended to live in families characterized by greater marital satisfaction and more effective parenting, and to participate in group social activities.⁶⁵ Yet another study found that when military children move, their ability to adapt is related to their mothers' adjustment and mental

health.⁶⁶ These findings suggest that relationships with close family members can help military children adapt, just as they can in civilian families.⁶⁷

For military children, moving can also mean going overseas. Families of active-duty personnel have the chance to live abroad, where they can travel, learn new languages, and experience new cultures. These opportunities may help children and other family members develop self-confidence, cultural competence, and other skills.⁶⁸

Adult roles for young people

When a parent is deployed, family structure must change. Older children and adolescents in particular may make new contributions (to use the language of the Seven C's model) by assuming new responsibilities and roles, including taking care of their younger siblings.⁶⁹ In some cases, they may even care for the emotional needs of the remaining parent.⁷⁰ This taking on of adult roles is sometimes called "parentification."

Few researchers have examined parentification among military children, and even fewer have examined how families readjust when a deployed parent returns home after a teen takes on adult roles. But we can surmise that, at least some of the time, an adolescent who takes on additional roles at home will reap benefits that foster resilience.⁷¹ First, such young people can earn a genuine sense of contribution, as well as pride in their competence, another of the Seven C's. Second, taking on adult roles may help young people develop a third C, character, as they come to understand that they must act as role models for their younger siblings. Above all, they can learn how family members care for one another, and how families function best when

they share responsibility. Some research in nonmilitary contexts—for example, among teens with sick parents or unstable families—shows that parentification predicts better coping and less substance use in the wake of stressful events.⁷² Although some research suggests that military children gain resilience by taking on adult roles, we need to confirm these results.⁷³

We also need to keep in mind other research that ties parentification to negative outcomes, including substance use, mental illness, poor functioning in relationships, and behavioral problems.⁷⁴ Taking on adult roles may disrupt children's normal process of individuation, that is, the process by which they come to understand themselves as independent individuals apart from their families. Children who have to care for their parents' emotional needs may be particularly vulnerable to problems with individuation.⁷⁵

What happens when deployed parents come home, and household roles change once again? The literature on military-connected children reveals that adolescents generally have a harder time with reintegrating a deployed parent than do younger children.⁷⁶ There are probably many reasons for this, but one may be connected to the normal adolescent struggle for independence. Adolescents who gain more independence during a parent's absence may find it especially hard to lose some of that independence when the parent returns. They may lose independence because the returning parent treats them the same way they were treated when the deployment began a year earlier (and in the life of a developing adolescent, a year is a very long time), or because two parents are now monitoring and disciplining them, instead of just one.

Minority Children in the Military

Some data suggest that growing up in military families may be especially positive for children who belong to racial and ethnic minority groups. One report found that African American and Latino students in DoDEA schools outperformed their civilian peers on the SAT, bucking the trend of wide achievement gaps in the general population. It's possible that in military families, minority youth avoid some of the hardships that minorities in the general population disproportionately experience, such as parental unemployment; limited education; poverty; and a lack of adequate health care, good schools, and safe neighborhoods.⁷⁷

What developmental process accounts for the fact that African American and Latino students do so well in DoDEA schools? A useful frame for further research might be Margaret Beale Spencer and colleagues' Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory. They outline how racism harms minority youth by degrading the environment in which they develop, for example, through violence, overcrowding, poverty, and increased stress on parents. But they also say that we must examine social and historical contexts of resilience for minority youth, particularly how these young people make meaning of their lives through "active interpretation." Spencer suggests that resilient functioning in minority youth may be overlooked, and that acknowledging such resilience would promote a sense of agency among young people.⁷⁸

Programs to Support Military Children and Youth

Many programs aim to promote resilience among military youth and help them thrive. How well these programs work is hard to

determine, because their evaluation processes have methodological flaws. Still, Colonel Rebecca Porter notes, programs that give young people opportunities to develop confidence and competence should resonate with military-connected youth. She writes:

For military youth, such programs would capitalize on the character and connection that are an inherent part of military communities and culture. They might foster caring among military youth regarding the unique challenges and stressors that are faced by military families while their service members are deployed. Most importantly, these programs would provide youth with the opportunity to experience the joy of operating from a perspective that was based on what they can do—on their strengths—rather than trying to thrive in the context of experiencing the distress that comes from attempting to overcome and compensate for their purported deficits.⁷⁹

We lack the space to review all of the many programs that the military, military-affiliated nongovernmental organizations, and civilian-based organizations offer to support military families. Instead, we will briefly discuss some programs that fit with our view of resilience—programs that focus on fostering, enhancing, and maintaining connections despite frequent moves and repeated deployments, as well as coping with the associated stress.

Many programs to help military children were rolled out quickly at a time of pressing need, and this may be a key reason that the quality of their evaluation processes varies considerably. The Rand Center for Military Health Policy Research recently assessed selected resilience programs to determine the extent to which they use evidence-based

practices. The center found that the creators of these programs often used scientific evidence in the development stage, but to refine the programs, they used satisfaction and use data.⁸⁰ Without empirical data and standard measurements of resilience, it's hard to reach evidence-based conclusions about whether these programs are effective. For purposes of illustration, however, we will describe four youth programs that base their approach on resilience theory and regularly evaluate themselves: the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS), the National Military Families Association (NMFA), and Operation: Military Kids (OMK).

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Military Child Education Coalition

The MCEC aims to ensure that all military-connected children get a high-quality education. It offers research-based publications, technology tools, and programs for military children and families who must move and deploy frequently. The organization is steeped in the philosophy of recognizing, supporting, and building on existing strengths. One of its programs, Student 2 Student, is a strength-based peer support program for military high school students transitioning to new schools, led and operated by students themselves.

Student 2 Student is based on the theory that positive peer support and connection enhance resilience.⁸¹ The program eases the transition to a new school by connecting students to peers who can offer advice on how to navigate the new academic, community, and social environment. Satisfaction assessments confirm that the MCEC's far-reaching programs are well-received.⁸²

Families OverComing Under Stress

Since 2008, FOCUS has helped thousands of military families with strength-based services to enhance resilience. The team of UCLA and Harvard researchers who developed FOCUS modeled it after existing evidence-based family prevention interventions, for example, Family Talk, a program for children and teens whose parents suffer from depression.⁸³ FOCUS's Individual Family Resilience Training is an eight-session program to teach families the best ways to communicate, solve problems, regulate emotions, and set goals—skills that foster family resilience in the face of stress caused by deployment and combat-related psychological problems.⁸⁴ Evidence for family resilience training's effectiveness is building. A recent study of 488 FOCUS families who underwent the training at 11 military installations in the U.S. and Japan showed a decrease in children's emotional and behavioral distress and an increase in prosocial behavior and the use of positive coping skills.⁸⁵ Further, parental distress fell, and family functioning and communication were enhanced.⁸⁶

National Military Family Association

The NMFA is a family advocacy organization that offers resources for navigating military life, education scholarships for military spouses, and family retreats and camps. The organization's Operation

Purple Camp program has served more than 45,000 children of wounded service members. The camps endeavor to build psychological strength and resilience by fostering connections with other military youth, teaching positive coping and communication skills, and offering service projects and recreational activities. Evidence of the camps' effectiveness is limited to satisfaction surveys of participants.⁸⁷

Operation: Military Kids

OMK—a collaboration between the Army and the 4-H/Army Youth Development Project—offers recreational, social, and educational support services for youth and families affected by deployment.⁸⁸ Rooted in theories of community social action, OMK uses a variety of programs to foster connection and improve communication between military and civilian youth.⁸⁹ For example, in the Hero Pack initiative, civilian youth fill backpacks with items for military youth to help recognize their sacrifices. Similarly, Speak Out for Military Kids is a youth-led after-school program in which military youth teach their communities about the experiences of military families. Evidence of OMK programs' effectiveness is limited to use reports and satisfaction surveys.⁹⁰

Implications for Policy and Practice

The nation has endured more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the burden of those conflicts has fallen disproportionately on a tiny fraction of the American populace. Those servicemen and service-women have two million children, who have shared their burden and made very real sacrifices. After 9/11, of course, we had no way of knowing how long these wars would last. From a practical standpoint, that means that programs to foster resilience often weren't

available until well after the conflicts had begun. In addition, in response to the great need, many programs were rolled out quickly, without the infrastructure to fully evaluate them and without the developmental, longitudinal research that could help them become more effective.

The research so far suggests that we should advocate for enhancing social support resources for military children and their parents. For example, Angela Huebner and her colleagues recommend that we align the formal supports of a military installation with the informal supports of the nonmilitary community, creating a “community practice” model to improve the lives of military families.⁹¹ Their recommendations have influenced such important initiatives as the 4-H/Army Youth Development Project and Operation: Military Kids.

We do not yet know the outcomes of these kinds of partnerships for positive youth development. Still, we would not take issue with this recommendation. However, most research on military children has taken a deficit approach, and very little research has examined the strengths that help them thrive. Thus we have only limited knowledge about how these young people develop in positive ways, especially in regard to the approach to resilience that we take in this article. Indeed,

because so few studies have tracked these children and adolescents as they develop over time, parents and advocates for military youth currently have their values as the primary basis for their appeals or programs of action.

We must invest, then, in developmental research whose quality and depth will let us measure how the inherent challenges of military life, and the promise of resilience-based interventions, interact to affect the wellbeing of children and families over time. However, additional research is but one component of a multifaceted approach to supporting resilience among military children and youth, families, and communities. We must, through various channels, continue to gain from the wisdom and experience of those who have experienced deployments in the past decade, and those who have generated policies and programs to support them, so that when we again find ourselves at war we can use the lessons we have learned to serve military children and families. The parents of military-connected youth volunteer to serve in our military. However, their children have, in a sense, been drafted. Our nation owes these children and families an incalculable debt. Funding and carrying out rigorous research that is translated to guide policies and implemented in programs that enhance their lives is but one step in repaying them.

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