

# International Programs and Resources to Support Children from Military Families: A review

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## Abstract

Parental deployment and frequent relocations exert significant stress on children from military families. This stress can be extremely disruptive to young children's social, cognitive and behavioural development. It can result in negative social, emotional, and physical responses. There are a broad range of programs, resources, and services available mainly in the US, but also internationally. The programs endeavour to mitigate the impacts of military life on young children by providing support to families. This paper explores the programs for families with young children and the need for culturally and age-appropriate resources. It also discusses how the Early Childhood Defence Programs (ECDP) project is responding to this need by developing three free, online Australian early childhood programs for parents, family workers and educators. This scoping review of currently available programs and resources will determine how the project, and others wanting to support children from military families, can best address this need.

## Keywords:

Military Families, Deployment, Family Support, Community Education, Early Childhood

## Introduction

This paper explores the effect of military family life on children from Australian and international studies, and the need for programs and resources for these children and their families and educators. International programs and resources from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom are examined and then compared to what is available for children and their families and educators in the Australian context. The need for resilience-based and evidence-based programs is also discussed along with the need for age and culturally appropriate programs and resources for Australian children from defence families.

## The Context

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) 2019 census revealed that there are 92 666 defence personnel in Australia. Of this number, there are 58 476 permanent ADF members, and 17 328 Reserve ADF members. Thirty eight percent of permanent ADF members had dependent children at



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the time of the census, while 44% of Reserve ADF members reported at least one dependent child (Australian Government Department of Defence, 2020a). This equates to nearly 30 000 children in ADF families in Australia at risk of the negative impacts of parental deployment. Indeed, 25% of ADF parents cite deployment as the 'most important consideration for families with dependent children regarding the Defence lifestyle' (Tan, 2020), and this is not surprising given what is known about the impacts of parental deployment and training.

Children can experience separation from their parents lasting from weeks to months due to training episodes and deployment (Baber, 2016). In Australia, Siebler & Goddard (2014, p. 17) found that children who experienced parental deployment 'generally fared poorly in terms of physical and mental health, and behavioural outcomes', while McFarlane (2009, p. 369) contends that 'the deployment of a parent to a combat zone may be one of the most stressful experiences that a child faces.' The impacts upon young children are even more pronounced; Rogers' (2017) research found that attachment relationships of babies and young children suffer as a result of parental separation, while Scandlyn & Hautzinger (2019, p. 235) found that young children with deployed parents were more frequently referred to paediatricians for mental and behavioural health issues than children who do not experience parental deployment. Chartrand, Frank, White, and Shope (2008) found that children over the age of 3 with deployed parents exhibited significantly higher levels of depression, and were more likely to externalise behaviours. Non-deployed parents also experience significant stress while their partner is absent, and this in turn also impacts upon the child, and the parent's ability to effectively support their child (Rogers, 2019; Cai, 2020).

As a result, a broad range of voices, including military families, academics, researchers, health professionals, and educators have called for support programs, services, and resources (Cramm, et. al., 2015). These calls for intervention include a specific focus on the need to mitigate the impacts of parental deployment (Kritikos & DeVoe, 2018), as well as the need to build resilience in young children and military families on the home front (Meadows et al., 2016). However, such programs and resources have been identified as lacking in meeting the specific needs of families with young children. There is quite a broad range of programs for military families, including those addressing mental health and trauma, disruption to children's education, and support during relocation, but as Friedberg & Brelsford (2011, p. 231) found, 'a review of the literature and available programs reveals that there are a scant number of available programs to assist families with problems resultant from deployment.' Some progress has been made since 2011 as this review will explore,

but this progress has been limited. To guide our review, the following research questions were used:

1. What programs exist in other English speaking allied countries?
2. What are the features of these programs?
3. How have these programs been evaluated?
4. What are the practical implications of these findings for the ECDP project?

### *The Early Childhood Defence Programs (ECDP) Project*

Research about military families with young children is limited across the globe, but particularly so outside the US (which has a strong military culture), and even more so within Australia. There is an urgent need for research into the unique issues experienced by ADF families (Rogers-Baber, 2017; McFarlane, 2009; Siebler, 2009). There is also 'a distinct lack of Australian data about the impact of deployment on families', as found by Baber (2016, p. 142). The ECDP is a three-year project funded by The Ian Potter Foundation and UNE and the Foundation of Graduates of Early Childhood Studies to address a need identified in Rogers' previous research (Rogers, 2020; Rogers, Bird & Sims, 2019; Rogers & Bird, 2020) identifying a lack of age and culturally appropriate resources and programs for early childhood. The ECDP, therefore, is a response to requests from both parents and educators for resources such as apps, eBooks, and physical resources and programs to help them support their very young children with the stresses associated with military life. Three free, open access, research-based online programs containing ten modules each, one each for parents, educators, family and social workers have been produced. They are being evaluated in 2021-2022, for public release them to the public in 2023. The programs are targeted to assist parents and educators supporting children aged 2-5 years, but many of the resources within the program are useful for babies and children in the early school years. To ensure that the programs are as effective and accessible as possible, the project is being built upon knowledge-based practice and careful consideration of the strengths and limitations of existing programs and resources. While there are very few early childhood resources available in Australia for defence families, family workers, and educators, it is the intention of the ECDP research team that the programs will be accessible for English-speaking military families across the globe, and most content could be freely adapted depending on country and context.

### **Methodology**

In this full scoping review, programs were searched from English speaking countries that are considered allies with Australia, that is, UK, USA and Canada. All programs that supported military families with children, or children from military families were included. To find the programs, a range of methods were used,

including general internet searchers, Google Scholar search, searching programs referred to in other papers, word of mouth from our stakeholders (Rogers et al. 2021), and searching military websites from these nations.

This review uses publicly available data in the form of academic articles and websites. Although a research project is discussed, it is only discussed in general terms that is available on the project's website, rather than specifically about individuals or participants. The research project has ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of New England, Australia.

## Results

### International Programs and Resources

To contextualise the ECDP, this review will explore international programs and resources across the US,

the UK, Canada, and Australia which either focus specifically on addressing the impacts of deployment or have a wider focus that includes deployment as a key concern. It will call particular attention to those programs and resources that are aimed at children in early childhood, but it must be noted that very few existing programs are aimed at children aged 5 and under (Julian et al., 2018). There have been numerous calls to ensure that any program that targets children from military families must be evidence-based, and should ideally undergo control trials or another evaluation process (McFarlane, 2009; Julian et al., 2018; Creech et al., 2014; Rowan-Legg, 2017). This could be considered to constitute best practice; many of the programs and resources described below are evidence-based, however, while some have undergone a form of evaluation, others have not. Table 1 provides summary of the programs this paper explored, the country of origin, targeted age groups, delivery methods, the main features of the program and how the programs have been evaluated.

**Table 1**

Program Name	Country, Date	Age Group	Keywords
Families OverComing Stress (FOCUS) & Families OverComing Stress- for Early Childhood	USA	All ages	Resiliency
After Deployment, Adaptive Parenting Tools (ADAPT)	USA	4-12 years	Managing stress, parenting approaches
Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists (SOFAR)	USA	All ages	Treatment focused
StRoNG Military Families	USA	Birth- 8 years	Parenting approaches, relationships
Strong Families Strong Forces	USA	Under 6	Parenting approaches, deployment & reunion
Operation Purple	USA	5- 12 years	Resilience, communication, coping skills, belonging
Operation Military Kids	USA	3-18 years	Community support, increased social capital
Military Child Educational Coalition (MCEC) & Student 2 Student program	USA	School aged	Resilience, community support, information, coping skills
Soldiers', Sailors' & Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA)	UK / 1885	All ages	Information, peer support
Armed Forces Covenant	UK / 2020	All ages	Information
Service Pupil Premium	UK	School aged	Financial payment only
Families Activity Breaks (FAB)	UK	All ages	coping skills, peer support, activities
Moving Schools Children's Activity Packs	UK	School aged	Support, relocation
Strengthening Families	UK	All ages	Resilience, social connections, child development
Military Family Resource Centres (MFRC's)	Canada	All ages	Resilience, community connection, parenting approaches
The Mind's the Matter	Canada	12-18 years	Information, coping skills
E=MC3	Canada	4-12 years	Well-being, child development, parenting approaches
iStep Program	Canada	6-12 years	Coping skills, peer support, personal coping skills

### ***Programs and resources in the United States***

In countries where the military is large and military culture is strong, and particularly in the US, wider safeguards help to protect children from some of the negative impacts of living in a military family. These safeguards include healthcare, housing, school programs, and supportive communities (Mogil et al., 2019). Additionally, the great majority of literature that details the experiences of the modern-day military family 'focuses overwhelmingly on the US experience' (Cramm et al., 2015). It is perhaps not unexpected then, that most of the well-known programs and resources are US-based.

### ***Families OverComing Under Stress***

Among the most widely cited, studied, and used programs, the exemplar is Families OverComing Under Stress, or FOCUS. The program was commissioned by the US Navy Bureau of Medicine and developed by a joint team UCLA and Harvard, and FOCUS is available in active duty military installations across the US and beyond. It delivers a wide range of services, but its central aim is to offer family resiliency training (Lester et al., 2013). The program

teaches practical skills to help families and couples overcome common challenges related to a military life. It helps build on current strengths and teach new strategies to enhance communication and problem solving, goal setting and creating a shared family story (FOCUS, 2017).

FOCUS is rigorously evidence-based, and the program has undergone extensive study, review, control trials, and adaptation (FOCUS, 2017; Beardslee et al., 2013; Kudler & Porter, 2013; Brendel et al., 2013; Julian et al., 2018).

While resilience training is very frequently cited as being central to any effective military family program (Bradbury, 2015; Hoshmand & Hoshmand, 2007; Kudler & Porter, 2013; Saltzman et al., 2011) and is a feature of many programs and resources, among FOCUS' key tools is the program's highly-regarded family narrative approach. Families who participate in the program create a shared narrative that evolves as a result of separate sessions with parents and children, to build understanding about the overall family experience of deployment. As a key contributor to the program William Saltzman (2014, p. 55) explains,

a graphic representation provides a way to bridge misunderstandings across the caregivers, as well as to provide an opportunity to see the whole context of the multiple stressors they have been through. It is a way to normalize

and validate their current levels of distress.

Siebler (2014) calls for a child-centred approach to ensure that programs respond to the needs of children, and FOCUS employs family-oriented approaches and works within the family rather than in a clinical setting (Kudler & Porter, 2013). Evaluations of FOCUS's approach demonstrate that the program 'improves psychological health and family adjustment for service members, spouses, and children alike', according to Kudler & Porter (2013, p. 24).

Julian et al. (2018, p. 110) argue that FOCUS 'is not specifically focused on addressing the struggles faced by military families with young children,' however, the program is 'scalable and portable' and can be freely adapted to cater for the different needs of individual military families and their communities (Kudler & Porter, 2013). FOCUS-EC (Families Overcoming Under Stress – for Early Childhood) has been developed to respond to the unique needs of young children, and the lack of available programs for 3-5-year-olds. This adaptation has been built upon community consultation, which has also aided the program's implementation (Beardslee et al., 2013). Randomised trials found reduced stress and a reduction in instances of acting out in young children (Nolan & Misca, 2018). More broadly, Lester's study of the FOCUS program found 'improved longitudinal psychological health outcomes for military children affected by parental deployment' (Lester 2013, p. 844).

### ***After Deployment, Adaptive Parenting Tools***

Another popular, highly-regarded, and evidence-based program is After Deployment, Adaptive Parenting Tools, or ADAPT. The program focuses on mitigating the impacts of deployment, but it works directly with parents rather than children. ADAPT offers 14 weeks of group-based sessions targeting positive parenting practices (Skomorovsky, 2019). Skills include managing combat stress and using contingent positive reinforcement rather than coercive parenting (Gewirtz et al., 2018). The program accepts military families with children between the ages of 4-12; some of the early childhood groups are catered for (Julian et al., 2018). ADAPT was co-developed by a leader in the field Abigail Gerwartz, and Gerwartz and her team have conducted extensive reviews and evaluations of the program to ensure its effectiveness. Randomised control trials have found that children whose parents have taken part in the program exhibit better adjustment, and parents report improved parenting and reduced psychological distress (Gewirtz et al., 2016; Gerwartz et al., 2018; Piehler et al., 2018).

### ***Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists***

Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists (SOFAR) is a free mental health service specifically targeted

towards US military members (National Guard and Reservists) deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. The project also provides resources to parents, teachers, and paediatricians to equip them with the skills to support children with deployed parents (Heiner, 2009). One of the criticisms of this type of approach is that it addresses the deficit, rather than focusing on building resilience pre-crisis. As Wright, Riviere, Merrill, and Cabrera (2013) explain, SOFAR does aim to cultivate resilience in military families during the stress of deployment, but the focus is on treatment (usually via clinical referral) rather than prevention. Wright et al. (2013) do however explain that SOFAR's 'community-based orientation' can be utilised in different contexts, and be adapted for both reservist and active-duty members. They acknowledge that 'the community-based approach of SOFAR is an advantage because it the circle of awareness and involvement within the community that may facilitate access to services for those families who need them' (Wright et al., 2013, p. 181).

#### ***STRoNG Military Families (Support to Restore, Repair, Nurture and Grow)***

StRoNG Military Families is specifically for military families with young children and provides ten weeks of intervention in a group setting as well as home-based resources. It builds parents' understanding of their children's needs and promotes the kinds of parenting skills necessary to cultivate strong relationships (Nolan & Misca, 2018). Like other programs, the community emphasis is a strength; Dayton, Walsh, Muzik, Erwin, and Rosenblum (2014, p. 4) argue that the group setting connects military families, helps to foster community, destigmatises the experience, and is 'consistent with military culture.' A study of the program found better outcomes in those families that engaged in the group-based program rather than those who participated in a home setting only (Julian et al., 2018). The study concluded that

the SMF intervention is tailored to military families with young children. This target population is especially vulnerable because of their level of stress and separations that are inherent to deployment, and this intervention specifically responds to their needs. Further, while existing interventions for military families may include some children under 7 years of age, few existing Infant military family interventions specifically target children in early childhood and address issues that are most relevant to this age group (Julian et al., 2018, pp. 115-116).

While programs that specifically target early childhood are rare, Julian et al. (2018) have also identified another valuable program within this important space.

#### ***Strong Families Strong Forces***

Strong Families Strong Forces (SFSF) was developed 'specifically with young children in mind' (Julian et al, 2018, p. 110), to address the challenges of parenting during the deployment cycle (DeVoe, Paris, Emmert-Aronson et. al., 2017). It is a home-based program for military families with children under the age of 6, delivered across 8 modules, and it aims to build an understanding of both parents' and the children's experience of deployment and reintegration (Nolan & Misca, 2018). Randomised control trials found that the program generated a high level of interest from military families, reduced levels of parenting-related stress, improved reflective capacity, and resulted in greater perceived self-efficacy (DeVoe et al., 2017; Julian et al., 2018). There is scope for 'for implementation in broader military and community service systems' (DeVoe et al, 2017, p. 25).

#### ***Operation Purple***

Operation Purple is another well-cited and well-studied program. Operation Purple offers a free summer camp, family retreats to help reconnect post-deployment, 'healing adventures', and a buddy camp for children aged 5-12 (National Military Family Association, 2020). The family retreats highlight the need for such programs given the challenges of reintegration post-deployment, but it does not address stress arising during deployment. The summer camp, however, does offer this support – of the 64 000 children who have taken part since 2004, 47% had parents who had deployed or were deploying (National Military Family Association, 2020). During these camps, children are taught psychological strength, resilience, communication, and positive coping skills, and have the chance to cultivate a sense of community and belonging with other military children (Skomorovsky, 2019). Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, Jaycox, and Scott (2008) conducted a study of the summer camp component of Operation Purple's programs (Operation Purple Camp) and found that children and parents alike saw the benefits in meeting other children from military families, coping deployment, and gaining independence. Another study of Operation Purple Camp undertaken by Chawla and MacDermid Wadsworth (2012) found an improvement in children and adolescents' social acceptance, athletic competence, and global self-worth. While this program is well-suited to older children and serves as a distraction from the separation occurring at home, it is not easily adaptable or suitable for early childhood.

#### ***Operation Military Kids***

Operation Military Kids takes a different approach to other programs in that it aims to provide a support

network for children from military families with deployed parents within the wider community. Kudler and Porter (2013) refer to this approach as 'innovative', citing that in 2011, the program was accessed by 103 000 children across 49 US states and the District of Columbia. The program builds community support around these children via 'partnerships with formal networks that can provide the social capital children need, and increase(d) community capacity to support military-connected children at the local level' (Brendel et al., 2013). Partner organisations include National 4-H, American Legion, Army Child and Youth Services, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and the Military Child Educational Coalition (Brendel et al., 2013).

### **Military Child Educational Coalition**

The Military Child Educational Coalition (MCEC) also takes a different approach to other programs, and while it is not specifically aimed at deployment support or early childhood education, it is an important program within the wide range of offerings in the US, and it provides some valuable approaches. The MCEC eases the frequent transition between schools that military children so often experience. The program 'encourages military families to enhance their children's resilience, fosters community support for military children and their families, and provides concerned adults with information about helping military children cope with uncertainty, stress, trauma, and loss' (Kudler & Porter, 2013, p. 176). The MCEC Student 2 Student (S2S) program educates the educators, taking a child-centred approach and providing resources and training to teachers of children from military families in middle and high schools (Brendel et al., 2013). The 2020 MCEC Summary Report found that 10% of professionals expressed a desire to learn more about how to support children coping with parental deployment, and/or the return from deployment (Military Child Education Coalition, 2020). The report also found that the most popular form of access to training materials is via websites, followed by social media (Military Child Education Coalition, 2020).

### **Other US Programs and Resources**

There is a wide range of other programs and resources available, although many are not well-cited and very few attract the same level of interest and attention as those already outlined.

Some additional school-based programs exist including the *Children of Deployed Parents-Group* which offer counselling to children whose parents are about to be or have been deployed (Brendel et al., 2013); *Adjusting to a Family Member's Deployment: A Resiliency Program for Children and Adolescents*, which builds resilience by encouraging students to express their feelings about parental deployment

(Friedberg & Brelsford, 2011); *Our Military Kids*, which acknowledges that 'military kids serve too' and aims to empower children from age 5 to grade 12 via funding for sports, arts, and other activities (Our Military Kids, 2020); and the *Military Impacted Schools Association (MISA)*, an alliance of school superintendents that serve school districts with high numbers of children from military families.

One of the key reasons why there is such a strong range of support programs in the US is because of the level of investment the US Government makes in such programs (Cramm et al., 2018; Hess & Skomorovsky, 2019; Skomorovsky, 2019). The US Department of Defence also directly sponsors *Military OneSource*, a wide-ranging service that provides free counselling, other support and advice, assistance with parenting, health (including deployment-related health problems), education, relocation, and 'everything from managing a checkbook to changing a tire' (Kudler & Porter, 2013, p. 173; *Military OneSource*, 2020). Other government-supported assistance includes *U.S. Army Operation READY* resources, including the *U.S. Army Deployment Readiness Handbook for DA Civilians and Family Members* (Cornell University, 2010), with a focus on keeping children connected to their military parent while on deployment, and the *U.S. Army Deployment Support Handbook: Children and Youth* (Cornell University, 2007), produced to aid professionals and parents in their support of children during the deployment cycle. Lastly, the Obama Administration founded *Joining Forces* under the leadership of former First Lady Michelle Obama and current First Lady Jill Biden, which aims to raise awareness of the lives of these children and their families within the wider community. Like *Operation Military Kids*, the initiative aims to build community support around the military family by engaging with a wider range of public and private sector entities and organisations (Joining Forces, 2011). note that *Joining Forces* also operates within the clinical realm,

challenging professionals to integrate evidence-based practices and licensing and credentialing processes across disciplines and national professional organizations, aiming to ensure that knowledge of military culture and training in deployment mental health are ubiquitous (Kudler & Porter, 2013, p. 179).

Other notable counselling and mental health services include the *American Red Cross*, who provide resources for military families, including deployment services; the organisation's free course claims to be the 'only national-level course specifically designed for military families, including parents and significant others, that bridges all branches of the Armed Forces and provides hands-on tools to help families cope with deployments (American Red Cross, 2020). *ZERO*

*TO THREE* provides resources and tools in the birth and early childhood space, notably via the Babies on the Homefront App, which can be easily accessed by military families outside the US (ZERO TO THREE, 2020).

Other programs and resources also utilise digital technologies. Friedberg and Brelsford (2011, p. 232) acknowledge that there is a variety of multimedia resources such as DVDs, websites, and online workbooks that help children cope with parental deployment, 'but implementation of these programs is not well documented and success rates are unclear.' It must be noted however that Friedberg and Brelsford's statement is now nearly 10 years old, and it is likely that considerable progress has been made in this space. For example, *United Through Reading (UTR)* promotes parental bonds by allowing parents to read to their children across great distances. Rather than relying on video call services such as Skype and Zoom, UTR has a dedicated app that allows for story sessions to be pre-recorded, addressing time zone differences and scheduling challenges, and children can re-watch the recordings. Other child-oriented resources include *Military Kids Connect*, an online community for 6-17-year-olds that creates connections between children from military families. There is a special portal for children experiencing parental deployment, including videos from children discussing their experiences, and an anonymous advice message board (Military Kids Connect, 2020). It also offers 'activities, games, videos, and surveys that promote understanding, resilience, and coping skills. In monitored online forums, children share their ideas, experiences, and suggestions with other military children, letting them know they are not alone' (Kudler & Porter, 2013, p. 174).

Finally, there is another US program in the digital space which deserves particular discussion in this paper. *Talk, Listen, Connect: Helping Families During Military Deployment* is a resource developed by the well-loved children's television program Sesame Street. It includes online tools and videos for children featuring Sesame Street characters, mobile apps, and information for parents (including about the impact of deployment upon children). It also includes 'bilingual videos, storybooks, activities, Sesame Street/USO family tours, television specials, "Sesame Rooms" in military spaces, and more' (Sesame Street Workshop, 2020). It is aimed specifically at children aged 2-5, and it has been developed in consultation with military families as well as mental health, child development, and military program experts (Wright et al., 2013). Program evaluations have found a reduction in child behavioural issues and an increase in positive interactions. More than 80% of families reported that the program helped cope with the stress of deployment and parental separation (Nolan & Misca, 2018; Wright et al., 2013). A case study by Desens &

Hughes (2013) found that the Talk, Listen, Connect 'Entertainment-Education' model is particularly effective as a type of strategic communication. The resource is easily accessible outside the US; Kudler & Porter (2013, p. 177) report that the program

has reached hundreds of thousands of households around the world through free DVDs and related materials as well as direct downloads from the Sesame Street website. Few public health interventions are as likely to be taken home and enthusiastically put to use by military children and their families.

It is no surprise that such US-based programs are widely accessed across the globe, given that no other country comes close to the volume of resources and materials produced by and for one of the largest militaries in the world. Indeed, a review conducted by Mogil et al. (2019, p. 98) found that 'at the time this article was prepared (winter 2018), we could not identify any citations for evidence-based, family-level, and military-specific interventions with child outcome data in countries outside the United States.'

#### *Programs and Resources in the United Kingdom*

In the United Kingdom, a range of public services and resource-based organisations offer support for military families, including the *Soldiers', Sailors' & Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA)*, founded in 1885, which offers support groups, housing, and adoption services (SSAFA, 2020); the UK-Government administered *Armed Forces Covenant* (2020), which offers support with children's education and childcare; *Service Pupil Premium*, a school-based program that provides a government subsidy of £300 per child for (usually pastoral) support in transitioning between schools (Skomorovsky, 2019); and *Families' Activity Breaks (FAB)*, a private charity that provides camps for bereaved military families with support from specialised bereavement counsellors (Families' Activity Breaks, 2020).

None of these services, however, come close to the level of collaborative, well-funded, evidence-based and evaluated programs in the US, and there appear to be no programs with a focus on deployment or early childhood. As Bradbury argues (2015, p. 73), while a range of US-based programs for military families aims to cultivate positive attachment relationships, 'no evidence was found of similar interventions in (the) UK'. Misca (2018, p. 3) remarks that 'there is very limited research and evidence exploring risk and resilience, parenting and child adjustment in military families within the UK', while Nolan & Misca (2018, p. 14) warn that there is a 'yawning hole in the British literature that urgently needs to be filled to ensure the wellbeing of young children in British military families in relation

to the deployment cycle.'

There have however been at least two reports that have aimed to evaluate programs for military children in the UK. One report conducted by the Centre for Social Justice (2016) found that *Moving Schools Children's Activity Packs*, designed to ease the transition between schools, have helped to address the lack of communication between schools. The report also found, however, that communication breakdown is still a problem, and teachers require better support, resources, and data on the number of military children in schools (Centre for Social Justice, 2016). Another useful report conducted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in 2019 evaluated the organisation's own early intervention programs at drop-in centres within or near two military bases, at Tidworth in Wiltshire and Catterick in North Yorkshire (McConnell et al., 2019). The centres utilise the *Strengthening Families* approach to build on family strengths, aid child development and reduce the possibility of child neglect (McConnell et al., 2019). Five protective factors are cultivated: parental resilience; social connections; knowledge of parenting and child development; support in times of need; and the social and emotional competence of children (McConnell et al., 2019). The evaluation found that the strengths-based approach has reduced anxiety levels and increased some protective factors for those parents who have taken part.

### **Programs and Resources in Canada**

While Canada is similar to the UK regarding the distinct lack of effective programs and resources for military children, they do a more robust support package than what is available in the UK. Cramm et al. (2018) explain that Canada does not have a dedicated federal government department to fund military programs and resources like the US does. However, the Canadian government does provide two important and well-utilised federal services. Similar to Military OneSource, *Canadian Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs)* are found across the country and offer a wide variety of resources and support services. They are run by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and aim to 'build strong, resilient individuals, families and communities' by offering assistance and advice with parenting, employment, acquiring skills, and making community connections (Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, 2020). The centres also offer guidance and support for military families facing deployment. Skomorovsky (2019) reports that some MFRCs offer dedicated programs for children, including Children's Deployment Workshops, Roots of Empathy, and Seeds of Empathy, but comments that more needs to be done in terms of psychological support, and raising awareness within military families of the vital need to equip children with coping strategies.

Rowan-Legg (2017) has called for resources to support children from military families in Canada, particularly to support children through the deployment cycle, and to assess family stress levels and cultivate coping skills. Such programs and services also need to be assessed for their effectiveness. Cramm et al. (2015, p. 9) acknowledge that several programs do exist, but 'the extent to which most of these program(s) and services have been based on evidence or rigorously evaluated for efficacy is unclear.' The US' highly successful FOCUS program has been adapted and implemented in Canada, although it has not been evaluated (Mogil et al., 2019). Other available programs include *The Mind's the Matter*, a webinar series for adolescents that educates teenagers about Operational Stress Injury (OSI) that may affect their military parent (Cramm et al., 2015; Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services, 2020). Two other programs also offer support to children from military families that are experiencing the impacts of OSI; *E=MC3* is for families with children aged 4-12 and uses a strengths-based model to improve individual and family wellbeing, while the *iStep Program* is for children aged 6-12 that helps children to understand their parents' injury, fosters coping skills, and normalises and validates the feelings and experiences of children in the military family (Skomorovsky, 2019). Additionally, Cramm et al. (2016) explain

there are multiple ways in which parental OSIs (operational stress injuries) can impact children and youth. Families need to renegotiate parenting roles and responsibilities, experience changes in spousal relationships that can cascade into parenting, and face shifting family dynamics .... children and youth can experience secondary traumatization, be at risk for child maltreatment, and manifest general impacts on their mental health and development (p. 334).

There is still much work to be done in this space, however, and Cramm et al. (2015, p. 9) warn that 'it is critical that unique health issues and needs be carefully defined and understood in a Canadian context.'

### **Programs and Resources in Australia**

Finally, we turn to Australia, where many of the issues arising in the UK and Canada in terms of a lack of research into the experience of military families, and effective programs and resources, are also a significant issue (McFarlane, 2009; Rogers, 2020; Siebler & Goddard, 2014). Table 1 provides a summary of the programs this paper explored in this review.



**Table 2**  
Summary of major programs in Australia

Program Name	Age Group	
KidSMART Program	6-11 years	Resilience, skills
Open Arms Counselling Service	5-15 years	Coping skills,
Kookaburra Kids	8-18 years	Resilience, peer support
Legacy	All ages	Information, support
Defence School Transition Aide (DSTA) program	School Aged	Information, support

Within Australia, specific programs are very limited to date, but several key organisations offer resources and support to defence families. *Defence Member and Family Support (DMFS)*, formerly Defence Community Organisation (DCO), is the major organisation who support defence families with services and programs. They offer services and programs to families to support them to manage military family life. Their staff include military support officers, social workers, family liaison officers, community development officers, and (regional) education liaison officers (REDLOs). The DMFS is administered by the Australian Government Department of Defence and also offer a range of resources – including counselling support, 24-hour advice and referrals, links to informative videos about deployment on their website, absence from home support teddy bears, some primary school-aged books (see <https://www.defence.gov.au/DCO/Family/Kids/Programs-products.asp>), and information booklets including the *Absence from home support* handbook (Defence Community Organisation, 2020). The DMFS also offers *SMART Programs*, provided by Defence Social Workers, with a focus on improving family resilience and other psychological resources. *KidSMART* is a four-week program with one-hour weekly sessions, specifically targeted towards primary school children to help manage stress arising from relocations and deployment (Defence Community Organisation, 2020). However, while these DMFS resources have promise, it seems that they have not always been well promoted; Rogers' (2017) study of ADF families found that the families who partook in her research were not aware that the children's resources existed.

*Defence Families of Australia (DFA)* is an advocacy group who reports to the Minister for Defence Personnel and the Chief of Defence. They are a group who are positioned outside of government, although their staff are paid for by the Australian Government. The organisation only employs partners of current serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members. DFA provides advocacy, as well as a social space for defence partners (Defence Families of Australia,

2019). In collaboration with the *DFMS and Defence Housing Australia*, they run the Defence Community Hub - an online resource for ADF families that provides information specific to posting locations, including 'information from schools and community groups through to public transport' (Defence Families of Australia, 2019). *Defence Housing Australia's (DHA)* sole purpose is to facilitate housing for defence personnel and their families.

Organisations that provide counselling and other mental health services include the *National Welfare Coordination Centre (NWCC)*, coordinated by the DMFS specifically for families of deployed ADF members (Defence Community Organisation, 2020); *Open Arms*, which directly supports mental health professionals to provide specialised care to ADF members and their families, including children from aged 5-15 (Open Arms, 2020); and *Kookaburra Kids*, which offers camps, activity days, and mental health education for children age 8-18 who have a parent with military service-related mental illness (Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation, 2020). *Legacy* also offers camps and mentorship programs for children in ADF families and can provide financial assistance to contribute to education and development (Legacy, 2020).

One of the most wide-reaching programs in Australia offers school-based support to ADF children. The DMFS facilitates the roles of *Defence School Mentors, and Regional Educational Development Liaison Officers (REDLOs)*. Defence School Mentors help children to integrate into a new community setting after relocation, including welcome and farewell activities; facilitate the transition between different schools and schooling systems; monitor child wellbeing and foster resilience, self-confidence, self-reliance; promote a wider understanding of defence families within communities; redirect children to other services where required, and provide support during parental deployment (Australian Government Department of Defence, 2020b). Previously known as the *Defence School Transition Aide (DSTA)* program, a comprehensive study by Gail Macdonald (2016, p. 98) found that

through constructing cultural knowledge DSTAs were able to anticipate students' needs throughout a deployment cycle thereby helping teachers to recognise the need for additional student support. By integrating cultural knowledge with practice DSTAs helped students to normalise parental deployment and build on their innate strengths. Furthermore, many of the DSTAs' activities encouraged engagement between ADF members and the schools. Involvement of ADF members with the school community enhanced students'

and teachers' understanding of ADF work and helped by building the schools' capacity to support students throughout a parental deployment.

However, Macdonald (2016) also found that teachers were not fully aware of the impact of parental deployment upon ADF children. REDLOs are specially trained education officers who can be found throughout Australia, with knowledge of both the unique needs of ADF children and local knowledge of the school system and available resources. Because of this specialised role, REDLOs are also positioned to advise relevant government departments about issues affecting ADF children and their families and contribute to education policy (Australian Government Department of Defence, 2020c). Rogers (2017, p. 239) warns however that while REDLOs can promote specialised programs, 'REDLOs need to ensure educators, personnel, parents and schools know about these programs and evaluate and update these programs regularly.' Rogers' (2017, p. 188) overall message is that

targeted support programs and access to age-appropriate and culturally appropriate resources were identified as inadequate by parents of children under five years old. This had not been identified in any known studies

before within Australia. Clearly, more work is necessary to effectively support young children and families during these critical early years to scaffold their understandings of parental deployment.

## Discussion

Within the programs outlined in this paper, a number of themes were identified. These themes are identified and listed in Table 3 and matched with military family literature.

Overall, while there is a wide range of programs and resources for military children on an international level, including many more in countries not represented here (see Skomorovsky, 2019), it has been widely demonstrated that the calibre and volume of programs found within the US are not replicated beyond its borders. Some US programs have been adapted for other nations, and some online/app-based content is accessible beyond the US, however, it is critical that issues impacting upon military families be understood in context (Cramm et al., 2015).

This highlights the need for culturally-specific studies in Australia, as well as programs that are specific to Australian Defence Force families. ADF families have their expression of military culture, and specific

**Table 3**  
*Themes within the programs*

Theme	Program	Theories within military families
Resiliency	FOCUS; Operation Purple; MCEC; Strengthening Families; MFRC's; KidsSMART, Kookaburra Kids	Parenting together and apart Protective factors Children's responses Managing transitions Parent's responses Communication
Parenting approaches	ADAPT; StRoNG; Strong Families Strong Forces; MFRC's	Resilience Communication Parenting together and apart Protective factors Children's responses Managing transitions Parent's responses Health/mental health impacts
Coping Skills	Operation Purple; MCEC; FAB; The Mind's the Matter, iSTEP program, Open Arms Counselling Service	Protective factors Risk factors Grief and loss Health/mental health impacts Community connections
Information	MCEC; SSAFA; Armed Forces Covenant; The Mind's the Matter; Legacy, DSTA	Communication Military support Community connections Resilience Protective factors Risk factors Health/mental health impacts
Peer/Community Support	Operation Military Kids; MCEC; SSAFA; FAB; Moving Schools Activity Packs; iStep program; Kookaburra Kids; Legacy; DSTA	Protective factors Resilience Managing transitions Community connections Health/mental health impacts

community and family rituals (Baber, 2016; Huebner et al., 2009). Differences in accents, flags and uniforms, special days, and terminology depend on one's national context. Rogers et al. (2019) and Rogers et al. (2020) explain the need for children to be able to see themselves and their family situation reflected in the content of a program for the resources to be effective. Gribble et al. (2018) found that even the term 'military family' is defined differently across the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and Canada. There should also be diversity in portrayals of ethnicity, and gender. In many studies, there is an over-reliance on male voices and perspectives, and female serving members are rarely represented (Creech et al., 2014). Nolan and Misca (2018) also found that programs tend to ignore the possibility of the mother as the serving member, and many services assume that the deployed serving member is the father. In addition to the fact that the ECDP project is specifically targeting Australian military families, the ECDP is ensuring that content reflects the diversity of ADF families, with portrayals of both mothers and fathers as serving members. There is also a diversity of recorded voices in the children's eBook resources content, including people from a non-English speaking background and Indigenous Australians.

Skomorovsky's (2019) review of 36 international programs for military children found that programs should be easily adapted to different cultural contexts and national systems of care. The research team intends to ensure that the ECDP will be a free, open-access resource that can be adapted to different cultural contexts around the globe adding to other programs and resources for families and educators. The program is also online, responding to calls for easily accessible programs. This is particularly important in Australia, that is geographically vast and where military bases can be quite isolated from larger population centres. Apps are also part of the project, building on an emerging body of research which suggests that digital learning and engagement is important for children in early childhood, particularly as we advance into the digital age (Palaiologou, 2014; Rogers et al., 2019; Taufik, et al., 2019).

Another critically important theme to emerge from this review is the need for programs to be evidence-based and evaluated to ensure the best possible outcomes for military families. There is a strong argument that evidence-based practice produces better programs, particularly when assessed and evaluated (Gerwitz, 2016; Gewirtz, 2018; Beardslee, 2013; McFarlane, 2009). Rogers' work (2017, 2019), also Rogers (2017) and Baber (2016) is among the only research into the experiences of parental deployment for young children from Australian military families to date, and this in-depth body of research underpins and drives the ECDP. The project, informed both by Australian and the

international literature, draws upon many of the themes discussed throughout this review. Strengths-based approaches and resilience, the central focus of so many programs and resources, is also a key focus in the ECDP project. The need to provide training to educators, family workers and social workers is also addressed, with programs for parents, educators and family and social workers. A family-centred and strengths-based approach is also utilised, and the project has been informed from the start by a Steering Committee comprising of ADF parents, veteran parents, educators, counsellors, social workers, and researchers, ensuring grassroots, bottom-up approach that responds directly to end-users and stakeholders. The narrative approach featured in the children's resources within the project is a style that has been well-used by Rogers previously, and her research is cited by others in the field (Nolan & Misca, 2018). In turn, it is hoped other military family researchers will research with young children in Australia to increase our knowledge of their specific cultural needs. Most importantly, the sore lack of resources targeted towards early childhood, and the impact of deployment, is the motivation for the development of this vitally important program.

### *Conclusion and practical implications*

Thus, programs and resources for young children from military families are needed to support them through developmentally sensitive stages as they cope with the stresses of military family life. Within the US, there are many quality educational programs and resources available. The UK and Canada have far fewer options and there is an identified need to develop programs that specifically cater to their context. Within Australia, culturally appropriate programs are needed so children and families can relate to the programs and see their lives reflected in them (Rogers et al., 2019). Importantly, programs need to promote resilience, be easily accessible and evidence-based or evaluated well to be considered effective. It is vitally important these potentially vulnerable children and families and the educators, family workers and social workers who support these children are well equipped to assist them in these endeavours.

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