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Extension Military Parent–Teen Camp Experiences: Family Resilience Building in Action

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Extension Military Parent–Teen Camp Experiences: Family Resilience Building in Action

Abstract

The purpose of the study addressed in this article was to gather information from military service members and their teenage children attending Extension camping programs together. We used a pretest and a posttest to examine resilience of both groups and compared other postprogram youth outcome measures to a normative sample. We found statistically significant increases in resilience scores for both service member participants and teenage participants as well as elevated youth outcomes in the areas of problem solving and connecting with others. Our results constitute useful information on the value of Extension outdoor and recreational programming for family systems.

Keywords: [military camps](#), [parent–teen dyad](#), [resilience](#)

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The Military Teen Adventure Camp (MTAC) program began in Kentucky in 2011. The program was initiated through a grant opportunity funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture by way of a grant/cooperative agreement with Purdue University. The original intent of the funding was to implement high-adventure camps for military teens. However, our University of Kentucky Family and Consumer Sciences Extension unit incorporated parents into the model as well. We were the first in the country to implement military camps where service member parents and their teenage children attend together. The underlying rationale for the parent–teen model was derived from a few studies that explored family reintegration and military camps (Ferrari, 2015; Le, 2014; Marek et al., 2015). These studies showed that the most successful programs focused on the parent–child relationship while building resilience through mindfulness in natural environments, resulting in sustainable and long-term improvements (Ferrari, 2015; Le, 2014; Marek et al., 2015). The scope of the MTAC program, then, is to provide an opportunity for military personnel who recently have returned from deployment to reconnect with their adolescent family members after the extended deployment-related absence.

MTAC addresses the theme of "outdoor adventure for family reconnection" by bringing military parents and their teenage children together for fun and engaging experiential learning opportunities that advance the life skills of self-responsibility, decision making, resilience, cooperation, responsible citizenship, and problem

solving. The active deployment and postdeployment stages can be times of great joy, pride, and family cohesiveness, but they also can be times of great stress and disorganization (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Alder, 2001). While a parent is deployed, the rest of the family must make sacrifices and work together as a team to fill in the gaps. As service members return from deployment, they must reintegrate into family life. The family must renegotiate roles and responsibilities across stages, often repeatedly due to multiple deployments. Moreover, family members change during the separations, and this circumstance can be especially true of teens. Everyone must work together to establish a "new normal" (Lapp et al., 2010). Furthermore, different family members experience reintegration challenges in unique ways, leading to their own unique struggles (Marek et al., 2015). However, if support and education are available to help families handle reintegration in a healthful manner, it can be a time to connect on new and deeper levels, resulting in a stronger family system.

In Kentucky, multiple MTACs have occurred annually. Each camp is designed to last 3 to 5 days and to include positive outdoor experiences and multiple opportunities for parents and teens to engage in high-adventure activities such as rock climbing, rappelling, zip-lining, mountain biking, downhill skiing, and whitewater rafting, to name a few. The camps require parent–teen teams, usually dyads, to work together, set achievable goals, and overcome challenges that may include personal fears. Each day begins with a briefing of the day's activities, allowing participants to set intentions for their time together. Prior to each activity, the facilitator identifies the specific skills on which each activity will focus. For example, prior to rock climbing, the facilitator mentions the importance of setting realistic goals (i.e., identifying how high on the rock each parent–teen team wants to go) and the power of support and encouragement. Embedded in every activity is a dual approach addressing skill building and application to everyday situations. Every meal is family focused, fostering communication and growing in relationship with other families. The evenings conclude with guided discussions and activities that reflect on the day's events. Each family is given an opportunity to share successes and lessons learned.

We undertook a study to gather information from military service members and their teenage children who attended MTACs during 2018. The purpose of this article is to highlight our 2018 camp evaluation findings and explain a model of programming that provides family-focused activities in a natural environment.

Methodology

Sampling Procedures

The convenience sample we used comprised 38 military service members, 13 military service member spouses, and 97 teenage children of the participating service members, for a total of 148 participants. We conducted an a priori power analysis for an independent *t*-test using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) with equal group sizes and based on a two-tailed alpha (α) value of .05, a beta (β) value of .20, and a medium effect size of $d = 0.5$ (Cohen, 1988). This analysis identified a minimum sample size of 34 participants in each group. Military service member spouses (13) were removed from the analysis as a result of not meeting the minimum sample size requirement, resulting in a total sample of 135 participants. We collected data from five MTACs that occurred from May to August 2018. Attendees were invited to participate in the study at the start of each camp.

Sample Characteristics

Military service members. Military service members ($n = 38$) who attended the camps volunteered to participate in completing the surveys. Most were male (81.6%). As well, most were non-Hispanic White (81.5%); other ethnic groups represented in the sample included Hispanic (13.2%) and non-Hispanic Black (5.3%). The majority of those who participated in the study served in the Army (44.7%), followed by those in the Air Force (39.5%), Marines (10.5%), and Navy (5.3%). See Table 1.

Youth sample. Teenage children of military service member participants also were invited to participate in completing the study surveys. The exclusion criterion for the children of military service members was being at least 13 years of age and accompanied by a parent. Although these sampling procedures yielded a total of 97 teenage participants who began the surveys, only 54 teenage participants (~60%) completed the surveys. These respondents ranged in age from 13 to 18 ($M = 15$, $SD = 1.23$). The majority were male (62.5%). See Table 1.

Table 1.
Sample Demographics

Characteristic	Total sample ($n = 92$)	
	<i>f</i>	%
Service member gender		
Male	31	81.6
Female	7	18.4
Ethnicity/race		
White non-Hispanic	31	81.6
Hispanic	5	13.2
Black non-Hispanic	2	5.3
Military branch		
Army	17	44.7
Navy	2	5.3
Air Force	15	39.5
Marines	4	10.5
Youth gender		
Male	35	64.8
Female	19	35.2

Measures

Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale 10-Item. The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale 10-Item (CD-RISC 10) is a unidimensional self-report scale consisting of 10 items that measure resilience through assessing

respondent personality, stress level, and coping abilities. The CD-RISC 10 is a shortened version of the original 25-item CD-RISC. Respondents rate items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not true at all*) to 4 (*true nearly all the time*). Total scores are calculated by summing all 10 items, with a range from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 40. A higher score indicates higher resilience (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007; Connor & Davidson, 2003). We administered this measure as a pretest at the beginning of the camp and posttest at the end of the camp.

American Camp Association Youth Outcome Battery. The American Camp Association Youth Outcome Battery is a self-report measure comprising 11 subscales that focus on camp outcomes related to positive personal and relational skills such as friendship skills, perceived confidence, and teamwork. We used eight of the 11 subscales (Camp Connectedness, Family Citizenship, Friendship Skills, Independence, Perceived Confidence, Problem-Solving Confidence, Responsibility, and Teamwork). The youth battery is designed to be used with youths ranging in age from 10 to 17 and has strong scale reliability (alpha coefficients for the scales range from .84 to .93). Youths respond to questionnaires concerning their skills as a result of the camp experience using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*decreased*) to 5 (*increased a lot, I am sure*). Scale scores are calculated by summing the scores and finding the average. The average is then compared to the norming population to determine the perceived outcomes of the participants. We collected these data only at the end of camp.

Results

For data we collected using the CD-RISC 10, we conducted paired-samples *t*-tests to evaluate the relative difference in resilience for military service members ($n = 38$) and adolescents ($n = 54$) before attending MTAC compared to after attending MTAC (see Table 2). For service members, resilience was statistically higher after attending MTAC ($M = 35.73$, $SD = 4.99$) than before attending MTAC ($M = 33.39$, $SD = 5.51$), $t(33) = -3.59$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.45$. The mean difference in resilience was 2.33, 95% CI [-3.66, -1.01]. This magnitude of difference indicates that a randomly chosen service member who participated in the camp would have greater resilience after attending the camp 62% of the time. See Table 2.

Also for adolescents, resilience was statistically higher after attending MTAC ($M = 30.09$, $SD = 8.71$) than before attending MTAC ($M = 28.44$, $SD = 8.04$), $t(53) = -2.43$, $p = .019$, $d = 0.20$. The mean difference in resilience was 1.65, 95% CI [-3.01, -0.29]. This magnitude of difference indicates that a randomly chosen adolescent who participated in the camp would have greater resilience after attending the camp 56% of the time. See Table 2.

Table 2.

Group Differences in Resilience Before and After Military Teen Adventure Camp (MTAC) for Service Members and Youths

Group	Before		After		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Service members	33.39	5.51	35.73	4.99	-3.59	<.001	[-3.66, -1.01]	0.45
Youths	28.44	8.04	30.09	8.71	-2.43	.019	[-3.01, -0.29]	0.20

Note. Service members: $n = 38$. Youths: $n = 54$. CI = confidence interval for mean difference in resilience

before and after attending MTAC.

For data we collected using the Youth Outcomes Battery, we compared post-MTAC data to the normative data collected by the American Camp Association. Results indicated that MTAC teen participants scored at the 50th percentile on Perceived Confidence; 50th–60th percentile on Independence, Teamwork, Responsibility, and Family Citizenship; 60th percentile on Problem-Solving Confidence; and 60th–70th percentile on Camp Connectedness. As would be expected, teen participants scored above and below the 50th percentile on some measures. Scores above the 50th percentile highlight areas in which the MTAC teens exceeded the average when compared to other campers, such as problem-solving and connecting with others, possibly due to their experience at MTAC. These findings also indicate areas of focus where the teens may need additional support beyond the camp experience, such as family citizenship. See Table 3.

Table 3.
Youth Differences in Camp Outcomes Compared to Norming Sample

Percentile	Family citizenship		Perceived confidence		Responsibility		Independence		Teamwork		Problem-solving confidence		Camp connectedness		Friendship skills	
	Norm	MTAC	Norm	MTAC	Norm	MTAC	Norm	MTAC	Norm	MTAC	Norm	MTAC	Norm	MTAC	Norm	MTAC
10	2.00	—	2.37	—	2.00	—	2.13	—	2.12	—	2.00	—	4.00	—	2.42	—
20	2.33	—	2.75	—	2.50	—	2.67	—	2.63	—	2.25	—	4.67	—	2.93	—
30	2.67	—	3.00	—	2.83	—	3.00	—	3.00	—	2.63	—	5.08	—	3.36	3.58
40	3.00	—	3.25	—	3.17	—	3.33	—	3.25	—	3.00	—	5.33	—	3.64	
50	3.33	—	3.63	3.64	3.50	3.60	3.67	3.77	3.63	3.68	3.25	—	5.50	—	4.00	—
60	3.50	3.53	3.88	—	3.83		4.00		3.88		3.50	3.51	5.58	5.71	4.21	—
70	3.83	—	4.13	—	4.17	—	4.33	—	4.13	—	4.00	—	5.75		4.50	—
80	4.17	—	4.38	—	4.50	—	4.50	—	4.50	—	4.25	—	5.92	—	4.75	—
90	4.67	—	4.75	—	4.83	—	4.83	—	4.75	—	4.75	—	6.00	—	4.93	—
<i>M</i>	3.31	3.53	3.55	3.64	3.48	3.60	3.59	3.77	3.53	3.68	3.29	3.51	5.21	5.71	3.84	3.58
<i>SD</i>	0.91	0.93	0.87	0.96	0.98	1.03	0.98	0.96	0.95	0.97	0.97	0.98	0.85	0.45	0.06	0.98

Note. MTAC = Military Teen Adventure Camp.

Discussion

Our findings are consistent with the concept that families spending time void of distraction focusing on a task at hand and working together in an outdoor setting is a starting point for sustainable, positive change in the parent–child relationship. The camps we studied provided opportunities for service member parents and their teenage children to bond through numerous activities and discussions over the course of the

camp. Results suggest that participation supported an increase in resilience for both the parents and the teenage children, as evidenced by pre- and postprogram stress and coping abilities. One possible explanation for the increase in resilience is the normalization that happens as a result of multiple families sharing their experiences with one another about the difficulties of deployment and reintegration. Being with a group of families rather than alone may have elicited an even greater impact on resilience due to the ability to develop bonds within one's own family as well as with other families at the camp. These findings also suggest that having healthy communication exchanges at the heart of all programming may result in improved resilience scores.

Conclusion

Our findings provide a snapshot of the possibilities that exist for Extension programming focusing on the family system. Bringing teens together with peers for a camping experience carries the potential for many positive outcomes as extensively documented through evaluations of 4-H youth development and American Camping Association programming. Bringing teens and their military service parents together for a camping experience shows a strong potential for positive systemic outcomes such as family resilience and family problem solving. Our findings are not unique to the occupation of the parents (i.e., service members) or their teens but rather might be replicated with any group. Due to the nature of being outdoors, void of daily distractions, family members are better able to focus their attention on each other and the tasks at hand. Many families who attend these camps have reported anecdotally improved communication, which they most often ascribe to not being able to use cell phones and other electronic devices.

MTACs operate from a family-centered approach, creating a "starting point" where families practice strategies introduced during activities and from which they can continue using those strategies upon their return home. The parent–teen camping model allows potentially at-risk families opportunities to face novel challenges, such as canoeing or rock climbing, which require codependence teamwork to conquer a difficult task. In the completion of novel challenges, participants gain a heightened sense of confidence in their ability to overcome an unexpected challenge, thereby building self-efficacy and resilience skills as a family system.

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