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## Exploring the needs of military children in public schools: What school psychologists need to know

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Exploring the Needs of Military Children in Public Schools:

What School Psychologists Need to Know

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Education Specialist

Department of Graduate Psychology

June 2023

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## **Abstract**

Although research has been published documenting the increased risk for negative social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes of military-connected students, no research prior to this study has given voice to these students and explored their experiences and needs. Five military-connected high school students participated in a focus group exploring what their lived experiences are in the context of living in a military-connected home and what they wish their schools knew to better support them. A thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data and six themes emerged from the discussion: the emotional burden these students carry, distance they feel from their parent serving, pressure to succeed, the desire for visibility within their schools, going home to more than homework, and the instability and unknow of military life. These themes can provide a framework for schools to develop a multi-tiered system of support to ensure military-connected students are seen, heard, and supported at every transition. School psychologists can utilize these themes to advocate for military-connected students and support their needs with their unique knowledge of both the psychological and academic demands placed on students

## **Problem Statement**

The current research investigates how to support students from military-connected families attending public schools. Students in military families face a unique set of challenging experiences that other students will never have, such as frequent moves, numerous stressors that accompany a parent who is awaiting or actively on a deployment, and confusing, exhausting, and/or uncomfortable transitions when a parent returns home from a deployment. Because of these specific experiences, students from military-connected families need unique support systems in their schools. These supports should be designed to address the stressors of having a parent who is deployed to a combat zone, on a training mission, or for a child who does not know where their next home will be. A review of the research shows that military children are at greater risk for social/emotional, behavioral, and academic challenges (Sogomonyan & Cooper, 2010). Furthermore, there is evidence that military families are not feeling as supported by their school systems as their civilian counterparts (Military Child Education Coalition, 2017). What is notably missing from the research are the voices of the children sharing what they really want and need from their school to help them manage their complicated and sometimes traumatic life as a military child. Listening to and addressing the needs of these children will help school psychologists and other mental health providers in the building level the playing field for military children in the public school setting. The current research will investigate what military-connected students wish their schools knew about living with a parent in the military and how they need their schools to support their unique experiences.

## Literature Review

Military families experience unique stressors that are highlighted and reviewed by Briggs et al. (2020). This longitudinal study conducted by Briggs et al. (2020) that examined how deployment history and status, as well as military life stressors such as injury-, family-, and deployment-related stressors, are associated with child mental health conditions and psychosocial functioning. This study used data from the Millennium Cohort Family Study (Family Study), which is a 21-year prospective cohort study designed to analyze the health and well-being effects of military service on all members of the family. Briggs et al. (2020) collected data from 3,558 couples across all branches of the armed forces who were both active duty and National Guard/Reserve. To be eligible to participate in the Family Study, participants had to have served for at least 2-5 years and be married during that time.

Briggs et al. (2020) collected data using several instruments. The Cohort Survey was given to service members and included questions regarding medical conditions, psychosocial well-being, substance use, and military-specific occupational exposures. Second, a 100-item measure called The Family Study Questionnaire was given to spouses. This questionnaire asked questions across four domains: spouse physical health; spouse mental health and adjustment; spouse reports of their children's mental/physical health and functioning, and family functioning and protective and vulnerability factors (Crum-Cianflone, et al., 2014). Additionally, data were collected regarding deployment status by accessing records from the Contingency Tracking System and the service members time away from home was determined by examining the self-reported total number of months spent away from home. Data on military life stressors was also

collected using a 18-item questionnaire probing about stressful military life experiences in the past 12 months, deployment stress (combat and noncombat), injury stress, and family stress. Lastly, child mental health conditions were assessed by obtaining the spouse's reports of diagnosed mental health conditions by clinical providers.

Briggs and colleagues (2020) found that 87.4% of families had experienced at least one deployment-related stressor, 86.4% experienced a family-related stressor, and 39.4% experienced an injury related stressor. Data also showed that for every one deployment, family, and injury-related stressor, children were more likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety by 23% and more likely to be diagnosed with behavioral or conduct problems by 18% (Briggs, et al., 2020). These findings are imperative for schools to understand because children's health and well-being are directly affected by being a member of a military family. These conditions are readily translated to the school setting and can negatively impact a students' social, emotional, and academic functioning.

Other research focused on wartime deployment related stressors only and outpatient provider visits (Gorman, Eide, Hisle-Gorman, 2010). This study was a retrospective cohort study using the records of 642,397 children ages three to eight of active duty military personnel and included 442,722 military parents.. Gorman and colleagues (2010) found that mental and behavioral health visits increased by 11% in children who had a military parent deployed, and both behavioral stress disorders increased by 19% and 18% respectively. Older children, children with fathers in the military, and married parents had greater increases in rates of mental and behavioral health visits. These results help schools understand that deployment can be an incredibly

difficult experience, and it is often a very long experience. Military children will function best when their fears and worries about their deployed parents are fully understood by those they are interacting with on a daily basis in schools.

Not only is it important to understand the mental health and behavioral impact that stressors associated with being in a military-connected family have on a child, it is also crucial for school psychologists to understand the academic effects from these stressors. Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, (2010) explored children's immediate and long-term academic achievement outcomes when they are faced with parental absences due to deployment. The authors examined the length of the deployment and the timing of the deployment effect on academic outcomes and focused on post 9/11 due to the massive increase in deployments the nation saw (Engel et al., 2010). The researchers used test scores and personal characteristics from approximately 56,000 school-age children enrolled in Department of Defense (DOD) schools. DOD schools administer the Terra Nova Multiple Assessment Test in March of every year, which measures students' progress concepts, processes, and objectives taught throughout the year. On this assessment, the results produce a normal curve equivalent (NCE), which is the child's overall academic achievement, as well as achievement in five core subjects: math, science, language arts, social studies, and reading (Engel et al., 2010). Engel and colleagues constructed deployment variables from the HFP data: ever deployed, months deployed during the current school year, and months deployed in total. Key findings of this study were that a child's overall academic achievement score decreased by 3% of a standard deviation when their parent was deployed during that academic year compared to a child whose parent did not deploy. Children whose parents were deployed longer had



lower overall academic achievement; if the deployment was 1 month long, scores decreased by 0.11%, whereas the scores decreased by 0.90% for an 8 month deployment. Although the decrease is less than one percentage point, the numbers illustrate that there is a difference in academic outcomes between what are considered short deployments versus long deployments. Lastly, Engle and colleagues found statistically significant decreases in math and science, compared to language arts, social studies, and reading (Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010). It is important to highlight that this study was conducted in Department of Defense schools for children of military families, wherein there is a direct network of support and the faculty in the building have a greater understanding of what military life is like for children. It seems possible that children in civilian schools would likely see greater negative effects on their academic achievement due not having a support system that comprehensively understands how military stressors can impact children.

The preceding research examined risk factors associated with being a child from a military-connected home, and it is important to also explore what those risk factors mean for families and how this translates to a child's school experience. Berkowitz and colleagues conducted an empirical study that examined how military versus non-military parents perceive civilian schools' climate, schools' encouragement of parental involvement, problems in school, their needs in school, and their school satisfaction (Berkowitz et al., 2014). Participants included 3,914 parents from eight school districts in the San Diego area. A total of 448 parents (11.4%) responded that at least one family member was serving in the military. About three-fourths of those parents responded that they or their spouse was currently serving on active duty and 121 family members were

currently serving or deployed outside of California. The researchers used the California School Climate Survey for Parents that comprised of a Core Module and a Military Module. Both modules were open to all parents in the study, except questions about satisfaction with school were directed specifically for military parents. The instrument was administered through an internet link and a paper version and was offered in both English and Spanish. Parents were asked to assess aspects of school academic and social emotional climate. They were also asked to rate their perceptions to the extent of which their school welcomes their involvement. Furthermore, parents were asked to identify the need for different kinds of services in their child's school. Lastly, military parents were asked about their satisfaction in regards to whether their unique family needs felt supported. All responses were rated using a four point scale (1 = very satisfied to 4 = not at all satisfied).

Berkowitz and colleagues (2014) found that military-connected parents had a consistently more negative assessment of school climate than nonmilitary families. The largest differences emerged in terms of parental assessments of the quality of programs and activities matching their children's interest, talents, gifts, or special needs. Military parents had significantly more to share on the social, emotional, and academic wellbeing of children compared to nonmilitary parents. Another key finding is that military parents perceived their children's schools as encouraging their involvement less, compared to nonmilitary families.

Another study incorporating Department of Defense students reviewed California Achievement Test Scores in 6<sup>th</sup> graders of deployed and nondeployed parents. Pisano (1996) found that daughters of deployed 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Army fathers demonstrated a

significant decrease in reading comprehension scores during Operation Desert Storm.

This study reviewed test results from 158 sixth grade students from Albritton Junior High School comparing each child's score differences from 1990 to 1991. Girls who had a parent deployed scored significantly lower in their reading score in 1991 than they scored in 1990. There were no other significant differences noted in girls of non-deployed parents or in boys of deployed or nondeployed parents.

A more recent study on military-connected students' academic achievement, documents that they often have gaps in their academic skill development because of their continued mobility and parental deployment (Ruff & Keim, 2014). It is reported that schools are not doing an adequate job of transferring records and explaining the differences in curricula between schools, and these students' are getting lost in the shuffle of school transitions. As a result, they are more likely to have to repeat classes and lessons, miss crucial topics that are foundational for later academic skill development, and their overall academic quality suffers. Military-connected students feeling like their academic achievement is not a priority of their school lends itself to feelings of being unsupported and invisibility (Ruff & Keim, 2014).

Not only are military-connected families feeling less supported by their schools and military-connected students at risk for more academic challenges, educators in public schools feel unprepared to support military connected students (Kranke, 2019). Educators recognize that military-connected students have a unique set of circumstances and experiences, however, less than 10% report being specifically trained to work with military-connected students. Kranke cited an additional study documenting that almost 50% of public civilian school staff report their school never or minimally educates staff

about military families (Garner, et al., 2014). Due to this lack of training, these educators who are working with military-connected students on a daily basis report not understanding components of military culture. Without this understanding, military-connected students are left unsupported in their schools which leads to more negative school perceptions and academic outcomes.

Due to the lack of educational research specific to supporting military children in civilian schools, Tunac De Pedro et al. (2011) explored previously conducted research on stressors military-connected students face and how those affect their academic experiences. The researchers then created a comprehensive heuristic model to guide future research on how to support these students in schools. Tunac De Pedro et al. (2011) found that there is not enough information available on how to create supportive school climates for military-connected children. Some ideas noted include integrating military culture into the core curriculum, celebrations of parents on active duty, schools with a military-centric focus, and school staff's increased knowledge of the unique challenges of military children. This article offered information that has already been explained in this review, such as the mental health, behavioral, and academic outcomes of military-connected children as a result of military-life stressors. However, this review is especially helpful in highlighting the gaps in the research. While some researchers have offered suggestions for future research, the voices of the children are missing from current studies. There were no studies found that used children as the participants. Listening to what these children really need could be a good starting point to continue this work and create more informed and supportive school communities.

## **Summary**

The current literature review affirmed military children are at greater risk for mental health, behavioral, and academic challenges than children from civilian homes. The author also found that military-connected families do not always feel a sense of support or community in their schools. Overall, there is extensive research on the risk factors for children as a result of military-related stressors, but full understanding falls short without hearing from the children themselves. There are significant gaps in the research regarding ways to support these students in school. Towards the end of this review, the author was able to narrow down some specific areas that are lacking in research. Some ideas the De Pedro discovered that the author of this project intends to use as a guide are placing a greater emphasis on celebrating military families, finding ways to integrate military culture into the core curriculum, and helping school staff understand the unique stressors that come with being a military-connected student (Tunac De Pedro, et al., 2011). To begin exploring the ideas above, helping school staff understand the unique stressors experienced by military-connected children can be examined by listening to military-connected children and absorbing their experiences and ways they need their school to support them.

## **Methodology**

### **Purpose and Questions**

Mental and behavioral outcomes associated with military-connected stressors have been studied (Gorman, et al. 2010), along with research surrounding the lack of support felt by military families as a whole (Berkowitz, et al., 2014). What is missing in

the abundance of quantitative research are the voices of military-connected children. This qualitative study utilized a narrative design to explore the actual life experiences of military-connected children through telling their stories. These stories provided a window for school psychologists and other mental health providers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what military children need to feel supported. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the challenges and stressors military-connected children actually experience in the context of living in a military family?
2. What do military-connected children wish their schools knew to better support them?

### **Narrative Inquiry and the Focus Group Method**

Narrative inquiry is a method of qualitative research used to explore the human experience through stories. Data from this type of design comes from interviews, journals, letters, etc. (Meixner, 2022). Narrative inquiry aligned with the proposed research question because it offered military-connected children the space to share their lived experiences when they would not otherwise have had the opportunity. It also allowed for children to build off of or form connections with others' stories, allowing the researcher to identify common themes these children need. A thematic analysis was conducted upon the conclusion of data collection to parse out common themes once the data was coded.

A focus group was conducted as the method of collecting the narrative data. A focus group is “a group of people gathered together to discuss a focused issue of

concern” (Liamputtong, 2015). The interaction between participants in the group allowed the researcher to grasp a sense of the shared experiences of the members of the group (Liamputtong, 2015). While most focus groups take approximately one to one and a half hours, working with high schoolers in a school setting called for 45 minutes. Focus groups should: provide information that is as specific as possible to the experiences of the participants; cover as many relevant issues as possible in an attempt to uncover unexpected issues; foster interaction and collaboration between members; and understand each response in the context of the person who offered it (Merton et al. 1990).

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited by using a list of military-connected students that the counseling director at the placement site provided. Five high school aged students in a Northern Virginia school, who live in a military-connected household were recruited. High school students were used because they are better able to verbalize their experiences and feelings. Furthermore, there has not been a mass deployment in four years so high school students have more exposure to this particular experience. All participants in this study had at least one parent who was currently still active duty in the military. Four of the five participants had a parent in the United States Army, and one participant had a parent in the United States Air Force. When a family registers their child for school in Loudoun County, they indicate whether the student is connected actively military, retired military, military reserve, or National Guard. There was no gender criteria to participate, however, four out of the five participants were male. A consent and a child assent form, that can be found in Appendices B and C respectively, were emailed to the participants to have their parents and themselves sign and there was both an email and phone number for

the parents to use if they had any questions. Participants were given forms using language that is at a second grade reading level to ensure readability. Each student in the focus groups was given an alphanumeric code (i.e. P1), to keep their identities confidential. The focus groups for this research was homogenous such that the participants all have the shared experience of living in a military-connected household with an active duty parent. The focus group was led by the author and took place in the conference room during the school day at the author's internship placement site. Students were asked to respond to each question two ways: based on their experiences in elementary school and then based on their current placement (as a high school student). This was intended provide one set of data appropriate for elementary school intervention and one set of data for high school intervention. However, participants generalized their lived experiences and the supports they need across grade levels. Throughout the entire research study, the student participants were given the option to exit the focus group at any time. The focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes in length and took place during the students' advisory period so they did not miss instruction time.

### **Instrumentation**

A focus group was used to collect data for this narrative inquiry. A sample of the focus group protocol can be found in Appendix A. This instrumentation is most appropriate as allowed for the participants to tell their lived experiences. Furthermore, focus groups offered these participants a space to hold a conversation style interaction with each other that will hopefully uncover new or unintended themes to emerge . The focus group questions were developed by the lead author. The final set of questions used in the focus group consisted of five core questions, with additional questions that branch



off. These extra questions were intended to provide a space for the participants to further explore and explain their stories.

### **Positionality Statement**

The researcher on this study who led the focus group and data analysis process, is a military-connected individual who went through the public school system. The researcher understands that there is an emotional attachment to this work, and this will hopefully allow for the study participants to feel more comfortable opening up and sharing their lived experiences during the focus group.

### **Analysis**

Data analysis was done using a thematic analysis. This approach allowed for the identification, analyzation, and interpretation of patterns within the qualitative data. The focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed using the artificial intelligence software, Otter.ai. In addition, immediately following the focus group session, the author took session notes for each participant using their alphanumeric code to write down major themes and takeaways. The author coded the data to identify any common themes found and corroborate those with the major takeaways written down in the session notes. Particular emphasis was kept on the differences in responses between elementary age experiences and high school age experiences.

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

Maintaining the rigor and trustworthiness of this research was essential to minimizing bias and maximizing the credibility of the data collected. One technique used

to maintain the rigor of this narrative inquiry was the utilization of a semi-structured interview protocol. The questions were prepared ahead of time, to ensure that everything of relevance was covered. A semi-structured interview approach allowed for the students participating in these focus groups the freedom to express their views in their own terms. Another technique that was used to maintain the rigor of this study was to utilize consensus coding. This allowed for an additional coder, the counseling director who provided the list of military-connected students, to look at the data to ensure there was not bias in the interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consensus coding falls under the principle of Neutrality in Guba's Model of Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research (Krefting, 1991). Maintaining neutrality is the freedom from bias that consensus coding will provide this data. Again part of Guba's Model of Trustworthiness, is making sure the research has truth value (Krefting, 1991). Truth value is whether or not the children's stories were accurately told. A member check-in will be used at the end of the focus groups to allow the participants and opportunity to add or retract anything they have shared.

## **Results**

### **Sample Characteristics**

The sample group (n = 5) was comprised of entirely active duty military-connected students. Further, 80% of the sample was male, in the tenth grade, and the children of service members in the Army. The sample was comprised of majority White students at 60%, 20% Black, and 20% Latina. The female participant was the only one in the ninth grade and had a family member serving in the Air Force.

**What are the challenges and stressors military-connected children actually experience in the context of living in a military family?**

Emotional Burden

When talking to the participants about specific challenges and stressors they actually experience living in a military-connected home, a dominant theme of carrying an additional emotional burden emerged. P3 was the first to share that when his father is not home he is “expected to be the man of the house.” P1, P2, and P4 all concurred. P3 also shared that he was “okay, but [his] brother was depressed.” He felt additional emotional burden trying to support a family member. P1 agreed with this experience and shared that “sometimes I can hear my mom cry so I stay in my room or go to a friend’s house to leave her alone.”

Distance

A second theme that emerged is the emotional distance that develops between them and their parent, due to either physical distance or emotional unavailability. P4 shared that her and her parent “were distant in elementary school and even more distant now as a teenager.” The remaining participants agreed with this statement, however, some were indifferent to the distance. In addition, P1 shared that “even when he is home, we still don’t see him because he goes to work before we get up and comes home after we go to bed.” With a parent never home, they miss so many important events that it feels like they are missing their lives. The participants had a discussion about the effects of a parent being emotionally and/or physically unavailable and what it felt like to always be the child without a parent at a school or extracurricular event. There was discussion

surrounding how this not only effects them, but it effects their other parent and their siblings. P2 described it as “basically being raised by a single parent, but the single parent isn’t actually single.”

### Pressure

The final theme that emerged for the participants about what it is actually like living in a military-connected home is the pressure that is put on them. When asked what word or phrase comes to mind when they think of being a military-connected child, P1 said “hard.” When asked to elaborate on this, P1 shared that “it’s hard to feel like you always have to be in control of everything because I never felt like I could ask for help or take a break. I think I feel more pressure than other boys to be ‘the man.’” The participants agreed that there is both academic pressure and emotional pressure. P3 shared that “I’m expected to be the man of the house when he’s not there. That’s a lot to put on a fifteen year old. But I take it because I have to.” The other participants agreed with this. The difference that revealed itself in the conversation is that the male participants felt more pressure to protect the home and the female participant felt more pressure to provide extra nurturance in the home. P4 said “I don’t have to be the man of the house obviously, but when my mom or my brother or sister is upset I feel like I have to make them feel better. Plus it makes me sad when I see them upset.” Through this conversation P2 explained that “nothing but an ‘A’ is good enough. If I don’t get all ‘As’ I get in trouble.” These participants are raised in homes that discipline and work ethic is instilled in them at such a young age, that they are expected to perform at the highest levels. Two of the male participants also explained that not only is there pressure

surrounding their academic performance, but they experience it in regard to the athletic performance too.

### **What do military-connected children wish their schools knew to better support them?**

#### Desire for Visibility

As the participants moved from talking about what it is like for them living in a military-connected home to what they wish their schools knew to better support them, the first major theme uncovered was their desire for visibility. This topic dominated the conversation and participants found themselves sharing more and more as their peers opened up. The word that was shared and unanimously agreed upon by all participants when thinking about a word or phrase that comes to mind when thinking about being a military-connected child was “lonely.” P2 further opened up by simply stating “that we exist.” He followed up by saying, “we notice they do nothing to celebrate Veteran’s Day or military families in any way ever.” All participants agreed that they notice that too, and P1 said, “I’m really proud to be a military kid, but it doesn’t feel like there’s space at school for that.” P3 responded to P1 by saying, “it feels like people don’t know how to talk about it because it’s a dangerous job. Bad things do happen and it’s hard for the people who live it.” This sparked a conversation about why military-connected students have to worry about making other people comfortable at the expense of their discomfort. P4 shared that “we want to be recognized. Well at least I do, but that feels wrong because we’re not really the one’s doing it. We didn’t sign up for this, we just fell into this.” The

participants had a lot of discussion surrounding their mutual feelings of wanting to be able to talk about their experiences as military-connected children, but not having any space at school to do so. They ended the conversation with P3 saying, “this is the first time I’ve been in a room at school with other military kids because I’m a military kid. I like it more than I thought I would and I wish we had more chances like this.”

### Going Home to More than Homework

A second common theme that revealed itself is the participants want their schools to know they go home to a lot more than homework. This theme was mildly tapped into when talking about what it is like living in a military-connected home and the discussion surrounding the emotional burden and pressure these students go home to. P4 candidly shared that “sometimes I have bigger things to worry about than math homework. Like making life easier on my mom who raises us on her own half the time.” P2 piggy backed off of this and shared that “we’re under a lot of pressure at home.” He followed this up by explaining that sometimes the “pressure can be overwhelming” and he “wishes there was more understanding at school of their lives.” The participants all agreed that because there is a lack of visibility or acknowledgment of military-connected families, there is a lack of understanding or even acceptance of their unique life circumstances. P3 wrapped up this portion of the conversation by suggesting “everyone who works in a school should go to a training on supporting military-connected students. It doesn’t even have to be a full day, just go to something to help understand us.”

### Instability and Unknown

The last theme that emerged was the participants agreed that there is a lot of instability and unknown associated with military life and they wish their schools had ways of making their transitions easier. Both the transitions associated with moving and with deployments or temporary duty stations. P4 shared that “it was worse when I was younger. I feel like he was gone a lot more and we moved a lot more.” The other participants agreed that when they were in elementary school, there was more instability and it was often times confusing for them. However, they also agreed that moving was easier when they were younger because their relationships and friendships were not as deep as they are the older they get. P1 also added that “I was always the kid whose parent couldn’t come to things because he was always working. I felt like I was always waiting for the moment some other kid would say something about it to me and make me feel bad.” The participants had an in depth discussion about how new schools “just threw them in there” and never explained why they were the new kid or did anything to ease the transition of being the new kid. They also talked about how teachers never supported or accommodated them when they were the only kids without a parent at the schools parties or activities. The participants all concluded that schools as a whole should be more sensitive and educated on what the transition is like and how it can affect the social and emotional health of military-connected students.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to uncover what it is really like for students living in a home with a parent serving in the military and what these students wish their schools knew to better support them. Since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there has been ample research published about the negative psychological effects of having a parent in

the military (Briggs et al., 2020). There has also been research published regarding military-connected families more negative perceptions of their school climates than their non-military counterparts (Berkowitz, et al., 2014). However, what is consistently missing from the literature are the voices of military-connected students. This study allowed for this unique cohort of children to express their experiences, their perceptions, and their needs in their own words.

The findings of this study imply that military-connected students feel a sense of isolation and pressure for reasons unique to growing up in a military-connected home. In many cases, military-connected children are left with the job of supporting the others in their lives to help get everyone through the challenges that come with a parent who is away. Further, the findings suggest that these children feel that the adults who are supposed to be supporting them at school are not doing enough to understand their uncommon circumstances. Per the voices of these students, they desire a school community that honors their families sacrifices, respects the challenges and stressors they go home to, and acknowledges that they live through experiences and handle pressures that their civilian counterparts do not have to endure. The stress associated with military life on students and their families will always be prevalent, especially with the ever changing political climates of the world.

### **Implications**

Military-connected children are one of the most invisible minorities in public education because of how little schools do to recognize or support them (Clever & Segal, 2013). The findings from this study suggest a need for a multi-tiered system of support



framework that should be used in public schools across the country. The first tier should be titled “Visibility” and should focus on creating visibility of military-connected families within the school building. This can be accomplished by incorporating the military into class curriculum and consistently celebrating Veteran’s Day and Month of the Military Child. The participants of this study highlighted that although Veteran’s Day was not consistently celebrated in elementary school, it was celebrated more so than in secondary school. Further, bulletin boards such as a “Wall of Heroes” should be visible in the building and there should be more open dialogue about military culture. Also, at the first tier of support, there should be mandatory staff trainings to help school personnel understand the stressors associated with military life and how to respond to the social emotional and behavioral needs of military connected students. An example of this would be having the school trained using the Military Interstate Compact Training. School psychologists and other school staff specifically trained in psychological and behavioral needs of students should advocate for the need of these programs. Further, school psychologists are in a unique position to be able to provide trainings and offer support to teachers and administrators who are just learning about the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. In addition, school psychologists should advocate for their school to be a Purple Star school or working towards earning their Purple Star and there should be someone in the building whose job it is to work with military families to ensure they feel supported and their students’ academic records are being read and considered from their previous school/state. This position can also be filled by a school psychologist who is trained in both the psychological and behavioral needs of students, as well as their academic needs.

The second tier of support should be known as “Protective Support” and school psychologists or school counselors should offer small groups for military-connected students to give them a space to talk about their experiences. The participants of this study agreed that they enjoyed having a space to share their stories with other students like them. It can be a therapeutic experience for these students and help them know they are not alone. Providing them a sense of community and comradery can serve as a powerful protective factor for them. The third tier of support should be titled “Direct Support” and should focus on maintaining clear and intentional communication with military-connected families to stay informed on any transition that could be coming up or identifying any feelings of lack of support. Military-connected families should have a school team of support made up of their child’s teacher and school psychologist or counselor to ensure all areas of need are being addressed. At the third tier, schools should also be utilizing evident based strategies that specifically target the more significant social, emotional, or behavioral needs of military-connected students. A large catalog of strategies can be found on the Pennsylvania State University’s Clearinghouse page.

The current findings also suggest avenues for future research. One is to explore the perspectives of teachers on how they believe military connected students cope and what they wish they knew to better support their students. Another avenue for future research is continued development of high-quality programs and policies to support-military connected students. Different stressors should be examined, such as deployment, moving, or the mental and physical effects of military-life on the students’ parent and how the nuances of each event should be best addressed. Lastly, a direction for future research is exploring the unique strengths military-connected children have as a result of

their experiences and what they enjoy or appreciate about being a military-connected student.

### **Limitations**

Although this study is a good stepping stone in the pursuit of allowing military-connected students voices to be heard, it is not without its limitations. With this study, generalizability is difficult. There sample size was small with only five participants and the participants were predominantly male. Further, all participants were active duty military-connected students so the same experiences and needs may not be the same for children of reserve or national guard parents. In addition, the majority of the participants had a parent serving in the Army, and all parents were military officers, not enlisted service members. Lastly, in terms of lack of generalizability, this data was obtained from one school in one area of the country. What this school does or what this area does could be different from other areas in the United States. For example, students in rural Oklahoma could completely different thoughts than students in Hawaii or Alaska. More students across the country should be heard to ensure our entire military-connected student population is being served.

### **Conclusion**

Military-connected students are the unsung heroes of our armed forces. These children live through so much and often times are left not only supporting themselves, but other family members. These children are at risk for more negative psychological and academic challenges, yet they are consistently being overlooked by their school systems. This research highlights the feelings, experiences, and needs of a sample of military-

connected students and their voices are an important contribution to the directions of future research and school practices.

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Protocol

With several others, you will engage in a narrative focus group surrounding the topic of your experiences living in a home with one or both parents in the military. This is what we call a semi-structured interview, so some (possibly all) of the questions may be posed, in addition to asking you to tell me more about what you share. I share your experience of being a military-connected student so this project is very much a passion project for me. I am here to listen to what you would like to share in order to let your school know different ways they can support its military connected student population. My goal is that no military student ever feels unsupported or unheard by their schools again.

#### Set-Up (5 to 10 minutes)

- A welcome
  - An introduction to the purpose of the study
  - A review of the informed consent form
  - A review of any recording procedures with consent
  - A warm-up, to help participants acclimate to how a focus group works
  - Any ground rules (ex. “Today we are going to be having a conversation where I’ll ask you some questions. I want you to answer these questions based on what you remember when you were an elementary age student ( around 8 years old ) and then how you feel now as a high school student. The reason is that younger children sometimes need different kinds of supports than older children and I want to help those younger kids along with the older kids. There will be about 5 of them and we will be together for around 45-minutes. Just like we did in the warmup, you all can talk to each other. Let’s remember to be respectful of our peers when they are talking, so they can share everything they want to share. Let’s also agree now that what we say in here, stays in here.”)
1. (Low stakes, set-up question) “Take a moment to think about one word or phrase that you would use to describe what it is like right now living in a house with one or both of your parents in the military. I would also like you to come up with a word or phrase that you would use to describe this experience when you were in elementary school, maybe around 8 years old.”



- a. “Do you have a different word or phrase that you would use to describe what it was like living in a military home when you were in elementary school or is it the same?”
2. “Next, can you tell me a word or phrase that you heard someone in the group use that you really agree with. It can be your own word again if you feel most connected to that one. Can you tell me why you really like this word or phrase? Maybe even tell me a story about something that happened in your life that makes you like this word/phrase.
  - a. Does the word or phrase fit for when you were in elementary school or does it fit your life now.
  - b. What is the biggest difference between being in elementary school versus high school as a military kid?
  - c. How could the school help you with that?”
3. “In what ways do you feel support from your school in regards to being a military-connected child?” (teacher, counselor, school staff)
  - a. “Do you have friends that are also from active duty or guard/reserve families here at school or in schools nearby?”
  - b. “What ways did you feel support from your school when you were in elementary school?”
4. “You spend a lot of your time at school, so what do you need your teachers to know about what it’s like being a military child?”
  - a. “What did you wish your teachers knew when you were in elementary school?”
5. (Wrap-up question) “As a military child, what do you need from your school in terms of support?”
  - a. What support did you wish you had from your school/what did you need from your school when you were in elementary school?”

## **Appendix B**

### **Participation & Withdrawal**

#### **Parent/Guardian Informed Consent**

##### **Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study**

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study called “Supporting Military Connected Students: What Schools Need to Know” conducted by Hannah Delmonte, MA from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to hear what it is like for your child to be from a military-connected home and how they need their school to support them. This study will contribute to the researcher’s completion of her master’s thesis.

##### **Research Procedures**

Should you decide to allow your child to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. If the participant is 18 years old, they may consent themselves. This study consists of a focus group discussion conducted during the normal school day. Your child will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to what they want to share about being a military-connected student and how they need their school to support them. The focus group will be audio recorded.

##### **Time Required**

Participation in this study will require 30 to 45 minutes of the participant’s time.

##### **Risks**

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your child’s involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

The investigator perceives the following are possible risks arising from your child’s involvement with this study: they are sharing personal information that could bring up some hard feelings so it may become emotional for them.

##### **Benefits**

Potential benefits from participation in this study include the child will be in an environment with other children like them and could gain a sense of inclusivity. Their responses will also provide helpful information so the school can improve their practices and supports for military-connected students in the future.

You will not receive any compensation for participation in this study.

##### **Confidentiality**

The results of this research will be presented to the school your child attends and at a conference with other graduate students and faculty. Your child will be identified in the research records by a code number. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included

that would reveal your child's identity. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents including the audio recording with their answers will be destroyed.

*There is one exception to confidentiality we need to make you aware of. In certain research studies, it is our ethical responsibility to report situations of child abuse, child neglect, or any life-threatening situation to appropriate authorities. However, we are not directly seeking this type of information in our study.*

### **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your child's participation is entirely voluntary. They are free to choose not to participate. Should you and your child choose to participate, they can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

### **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your child's participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

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### **Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject**

Dr. Lindsey Harvell-Bowman

Chair, Institutional Review Board

James Madison University

(540) 568-2611

[harve2la@jmu.edu](mailto:harve2la@jmu.edu)

### **Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of my child as a participant in this study. I freely consent for my child to participate and be audio recorded. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent for my child to be (audio recorded) recorded during their interview. (please initial)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Child (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent/Guardian (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent/Guardian/Student if over 18 (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

This study has been approved by the IRB, protocol #23-3539.

**Appendix C**

**CHILD ASSENT FORM (Ages 13-17)**

**IRB # 23-3539**

**SUPPORTING MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS: WHAT SCHOOLS NEED TO KNOW**

We are inviting you to participate in this study because you are a teenager who lives in a family with a parent in the military, and we are interested in what your experience in a military-connected home has been like and what kind of support you would like from your school.

First, we will place you in a group with other teenagers who have a parent in the military and ask you some questions. Then, we want you to talk to the other students about their answers, experiences, and ideas. We will also record your responses so we can go back later, listen to them, and check with you to make sure you are happy with your answer.

Some of the stories and experiences your peers share may cause you to feel some hard emotions as a result of your own experiences. The primary reason for doing this study is to discover what you wish your school knew about what it is like to be a military-connected child and how your school can support you.

Your responses will be completely confidential. The audio recordings will only be heard by the researcher and no individual responses will be identified in the final presentation

We have asked your parents for their permission for you to do this study. Please talk this over with them before you decide whether or not to participate.

If you have any questions at any time, please ask one of the researchers.

If you check "yes," it means that you have decided to participate and have read everything that is on this form. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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