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## GUEST EDITORIAL

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# Supporting America's Military Children and Families

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Military children are our nation's children and military families are our nation's families. They serve courageously and their commitment and sense of duty is comparable to their military service family members', worthy of national interest, and most worthy of national commitment, support, and sustainment. Military children's involvement in national service is one that they do not choose, but they take on because of the occupation of their parents. It was once said that if the military wanted enlisted service members and officers to have spouses and children, they would have been issued to them. This attitude is from a different time and era, when the force was mostly made up of young men who were drafted into military service, and when there were far fewer family members. Today, there are about two million children and adolescents who are the sons and daughters of America's active duty, reserve, or National Guard military members. In addition, there are approximately four million youth who are the sons or daughters of veterans who have served since 9/11.

Before the start of the all-volunteer force, spouses and children were fewer in number and, when present, were typically those of officers or senior enlisted members. Today, according to a recent U.S. Department of Defense Demographics Report (DoD, 2010), military family members outnumber service members: 57% of the active force are married and 44% of active duty members have children. Of these 1.2 million children of active duty members, almost three-quarters are 11 years of age or younger and 42% of all children are under the age of 6 years. Approximately 43% of selected reserve members (including both Reserve and National Guard components) have children, and nearly 60% of these children are

younger than 12 years. The U.S. military community includes a population of mostly young families living throughout the continental United States, Hawaii, Alaska, and at overseas locations. While many live on or near military installations, many others also reside in geographically remote areas. They live in the communities where all of us live, but we do not always identify them for who they are or their connections to military life or challenges.

Not until their recent media attention have military children and families come to the broader attention of the public and scientists around the country. As a result, the experiences and developmental life course of military children have largely gone unstudied. Who are these children and what can we learn from the strength they possess and the challenges that they face? They are as different from each other as they are alike, and reflect the broad socioeconomic, racial, cultural, and ethnic dimensions of the United States. In contrast to their diverse demographics, they share common values and experiences that come with their parents' military-related duty. These characteristics include a sense of meaning and purpose, military community connectedness, and service-related pride, in addition to shared experiences such as frequent residential moves, combat and non-combat related deployments, and possible parental combat related sequelae.

Combat deployment impact has been profound for military families. Since 2001, over two million military service men and women have deployed to combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. They come from every military service branch, hail from every state in the country, and represent the active duty, National Guard, and reserve components of the military. Many families have faced repeated deployments, some as many as five or more. Since the start of combat operations over 6,000 service members have died in combat theater, tens of thousands have suffered combat injuries, and hundreds of thousands continue to suffer with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of varying severity.

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As this issue goes to publication, combat operations have slowed and many service men and women have returned from duty in war zones, but the relevance of these experiences has not ended. Whereas combat experiences are decreasing, future exposure of military service members is likely, given ongoing worldwide operations of the U.S. military. In addition, the impact of these combat related experiences and conditions may continue to impact their health and functioning, as well as the health and functioning of their families for many years.

There are several reports of risks to family functioning that could certainly affect a child's health. Increasing rates of maltreatment of military children since the start of combat deployments in 2001 have been reported (Gibbs, Martin, Kupper, & Johnson, 2007; McCarroll et al., 2007; Rentz et al., 2007), mostly explained by rising rates of child neglect. The U.S. Department of Defense (2010) has reported that divorce rates in both enlisted members and officers have increased during the past decade, with higher rates in 2009 than in 2000 for both officers (1.8% vs. 1.4%) and enlisted members (4.0% vs. 2.9%) in all military service branches. Milliken, Auchterlonie, and Hoge (2007) described changes in self-identified concerns in 88,000 U.S. Army soldiers between initial post-deployment screening and a screening that was conducted three to six months later. Soldiers who endorsed "serious conflict with your spouse, family members or close friends" increased four-fold between the first and second screening. These data and other findings suggest a broader effect of deployment on the military family. In order to positively affect the well-being of military children, we must appreciate that their health is intricately connected to the health of their parents and other family members; they live lives that are linked in both experience and in outcome (Elder, 1998).

Several investigators have specifically examined the effects of combat deployment on children. In their study, Lester and colleagues (2010) reported that levels of distress in children were elevated above community norms in both the "currently deployed" and "recently returned" military parent groups. Nondeployed at-home civilian parents in their study had greater levels of distress in the currently deployed group compared with the recently returned group. This finding suggests that the pattern of high frequency deployed may cause sustained distress in military children, regardless of the deployment status of their parent. The experience of repeated and ongoing combat deployments may create a climate of distress in both families and communities, potentially affecting children differently than their parents.

If a child's distress continues, at what point and under what circumstances does it remit? What are the cascading effects of these experiences on military children's longer term development? What are the developmental

differences between military children of different ages, especially infants, toddlers, and pre-schoolers, who largely have not been studied? Answers to these and similar questions are critical to informing effective policy and intervention strategies. Complicating deployment separations and reunifications, a family dealing with parental posttraumatic stress disorder, combat injury, or traumatic brain injury will be faced with even more complex challenges. Additional research in these areas is required. A recent publication discusses the nature of the research that is needed and, as well, points to areas of policy and program applications that should be linked to this research.

### *The Future of Children (2013)*

The Fall 2013 issue of *The Future of Children* (Cozza & Lerner, 2013) focusing on military children and families should be of interest to researchers of this population (the issue may be accessed at [http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/journals/journal\\_details/index.xml?journalid=80](http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/journals/journal_details/index.xml?journalid=80)).

The collected group of chapters effectively integrates existing knowledge about today's military children and families, to identify what we know (and what we do not know) about their strengths and the challenges that they face and the programs that serve them. In fact, the authors emphasize that research that focuses on military children and families, while growing, remains quite limited. Much of the current research examines their stressful experiences (for example deployment, moving, maltreatment, and abuse) and other secondary negative consequences. As a result, the existing research offers only a partial picture of the experiences of military children. A truly representative account would be a balanced assessment, one that measures the effects of risks, but also incorporates a focus on strengths—and links the lives of military children with their service member and civilian parents across their respective life courses.

In fact, there are many factors that protect military children and parents from stress including the perception that society appreciates the value of military service, pride in contributing to an important mission, a sense of belonging to a military culture, and awareness that networks of support do not go away when active service ends. In addition to providing a haven of safety and stability in difficult times, family relationships can help military-connected youngsters make meaning of adversity, affirm their strengths, feel connected through mutual support and collaboration, provide models and mentors, offer financial security, and frame the stressful circumstances in the context of family values and spirituality. The culture of the modern military gives families the capacity to help children see their experiences as a badge of honor rather than a burden.

The *Future of Children* issue (Cozza & Lerner, 2013) includes nine chapters focused on different topics relevant to the lives of military children and families and concludes with an afterword about what we as a nation can learn from military children. All authors have taken a life-course perspective (Elder, 1998) in addressing each of their topics of interest, recognizing that the lives of military children are inextricably linked with the lives of their parents and other family members, and that they live in and transition between military and civilian communities across the country, providing both challenges to—and opportunities for—intervention, sustainment, and growth. Where research related to military children and families is less developed, authors integrated relevant scientific study of civilian children and families, expanding our knowledge and building a more complete picture of military children. Contributions in this issue are broad and comprehensive.

To illustrate, in their article on the demographics of military children and families, Clever and Segal (2013) describe the striking diversity of the military community and the need for flexible and adaptive programs of support, as well as differences across active duty, reserve, and National Guard components. They speak to the need for more nuanced research and expansion of targeted programs that reflect the complexity of military and veteran families.

Hosek and Wadsworth (2013) describe the economic conditions of military families, highlighting the advantages related to guaranteed income, universal health care, residential housing, and the availability of on-installation community support programs—all of which have contributed to improved financial circumstances of military families in the last decade. They also write about the challenges to military spouses, their lower wages, and difficulty in career progression that is disrupted by frequent moves.

In their discussion of military children from birth to five years, Osofsky and Chartrand (2013) remind us that military families are young and that nearly half of military children are under the age of 5 years. They highlight how the stresses of military life uniquely affect the development of the very young and how programs of support must sustain parenting in these young families.

Floyd and Phillips (2013) discuss child care and other support programs, recognizing the success of the Department of Defense (DoD) in building a most accessible, affordable, and high-quality child care system that serves as a model child care system for the nation. In addition, these authors reflect on how the DoD continues to adapt this program to support families through times of high deployment and to meet the needs of National Guard and reserve children who often live at great distances from military installations.

In their article on resilience among military youth, Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, and Lerner (2013) apply the principles and theory of resilience to military youth,

recognizing inherent strengths in the community that support health and growth and the contribution of social programming to positive health outcomes. In addition, these authors point to the need for continued research in how positive youth development is sustained or can be expanded in communities at risk.

Lester and Flake (2013) describe how wartime military service affects children and families, summarizing the small but growing and consistent literature describing the distress and social-emotional challenges within military families resulting from combat deployment and family reunification. They also highlight our growing understanding of family prevention science, and how family and community programming can successfully support our military families and children.

While the issue focuses on the strengths of military children and families, it also highlights the unique challenges and risks inherent to military life. In their chapter on when a parent is injured or killed in combat, Holmes, Rauch, and Cozza (2013) describe the unique risks resulting from the greatest adversities that military families face: parental physical injury, traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, and parental death. The authors highlight the importance of tailored prevention and treatment programs that target these higher risk groups in order to support parenting capacity, enhance family organization, and ensure access to necessary mental health services.

Kudler and Porter (2013) describe how building communities of care for military children and families requires a system of services that integrates clinical and community based care at the local, state, and national level. They contend that effective programs must interact with parents and children within health care settings—but also in schools, youth organizations, law enforcement and judicial systems, educational and vocational programs, and veterans' organizations—creating informed communities that are both aware of and available to the military and veteran families that live within them.

In their chapter on unlocking insights about military children and families, Chandra and London (2013) describe how researchers can continue to build our understanding of the life course of military children by utilizing data that currently exist in large DoD and other national data sets. They also describe the benefits of incorporating questions about military family experience into other large national level studies and, in turn, of funding and implementing time-sensitive smaller-scale and customized studies. These authors also highlight that it is only through longitudinal studies that we will fully understand how military service affects development across the life-span, an important question yet to be answered.

Finally, in the afterword, on what we can learn from military children and families, Masten (2013) describes how the nation can learn from the experience of military

children and families. As the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, and the nation as a whole develop solutions to support the health and well-being of military children, Masten encourages us to use these important lessons-learned and translate them to sustain the health and resilience of all American families, especially those facing a variety of challenges or adversities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The benefit of such a comprehensive endeavor as the 2013 issue of *The Future of Children* is that it provides a much-needed framework to understand the unique risks and strengths of military children and their families—ideas that can guide future research and public policy. The issue is a reminder that the understanding of military children should be balanced, recognizing the risks that they endure as well as the strengths that they possess and skills that they develop through those experiences. An emphasis on strengths and positive development of children through the inherent risks of military life provides the pathway for creating effective preventive interventions that can sustain children through challenging times. Research on military children will not only benefit this population of American young; it can contribute both to a general understanding of their human development, and also to our knowledge of other populations of American children.

In turn, derived from such research, we need a national plan to meet the needs of military and veteran children and families. However, as Cozza, Haskins, and Lerner (2013) note, this plan will not come cheaply. An effective national plan requires an expanded and coordinated system of care that integrates resources both within and outside of the DoD, including other federal agencies (Veterans Affairs and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), other military systems of care (such as TRICARE), state and local mental health systems, as well as private providers and community-based programs (school systems and community colleges, child-care programs, and faith-based organizations). In order for this plan to succeed, effective programs must be grounded in research of military children and families that meets the highest standards of scientific investigation, so that prevention and treatment interventions can incorporate evidence based research and practice. Any lesser national program or scientific agenda to assist military children and families would miss the mark and disserve those who have given so much.

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