

Exploring Children's Socio-Emotional Outcomes as a Result of Parents' Military Service in Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

Military service conditions like geographical moves due to postings, disruptions in social networks and routines, separations and instability in family functioning, and potential risk of injury or death of a parent during combat operations, layers complexity to military children's adjustment during various critical developmental phases of life. This article reviews the impact of common military stressors on the socio-emotional outcomes and attachment security of military children based on existing studies and derives similarities in findings within the Indian context. There is a deficit of studies which explore the impact on this under-researched population and this article aims to highlight the need for understanding the specific contextual stressors and stimulating discussions on the intervention needs and policy programs to benefit children from this background.

Keywords: *Indian Military Children, Military Stressors, Socioemotional Outcomes*

Child health and well-being are of vital concern to any nation as children form the bedrock of the talent pool to fuel its growth and progress. Psychosocial stressors faced by children with parents serving in the Indian military are different from normative motivational and developmental stressors faced by civilian children of similar age. Stressors in the form of regular disruptions in social networks due to geographical moves, separations and reunions due to fathers' field postings necessitating reorganisation of family boundaries and routines, and high-risk potential of injury or death of a parent during combat operations are unique to military life. Thus, military context layers complexity to child adjustment and coping during various critical developmental phases of their life.

Due to the vast geographical extent of the country with porous borders and disputed boundary agreements with several neighbouring countries at multiple places, Indian military soldiers are liable to be deployed in far-flung locations ranging from sub-zero temperatures in Siachen to mountainous dense jungles in the northeast or to the blistering conditions in Rajasthan and so on. Many of these locations are non-family postings in harsh unsafe terrain or with limited availability of living accommodations and facilities for the families. The extent of communication frequency with service personnel is also unreliable due to the

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either non-availability of mobile networks in such locations or due to the 'no phone usage' policy during operational circumstances. Besides remote deployments (sometimes protracted as seen recently in Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal sectors), the soldiers are also drawn into counter-insurgency operations in Kashmir, low-intensity conflicts, or a myriad of other roles like aid to civil authorities during natural/manmade calamities (floods, earthquakes, riots, bridge collapses, civilian rescue operations etc). The stress owing to occupational demands and professional duties of the service personnel have been very well researched and remedial measures and interventions wrought into place. However, there's a huge gap in awareness about the impact of military service on the serving personnel's families and children which warrants further investigation. Most of the existing studies in this regard are carried out for families of soldiers from developed nations where societal values and pressures are entirely different from the Indian context.

Impact of Military Service on Military Children

The common assumption about military-connected children is related to their being adaptable, confident, resilient and successful in life by virtue of early life lessons in coping due to their specific military backgrounds. Many renowned personalities in the public consciousness hail from higher-rank military backgrounds and have benefitted due to their parents' cosmopolitan outlook, existing facilities for personal development and a strong-knit community network within military cantonments. However, it is vital to gain insight into the experiences of the rest of the vast majority of children from other rank backgrounds to understand their adaptation to contextual stressors. Children's well-being can enable them to effectively support the well-being, performance and coping of the military parent (Segal, 1986). The bulk of personnel in various arms of the services in the Indian context viz infantry, armoured and others come from rural or semi-urban areas with basic educational qualifications up to senior secondary or higher secondary level. The call of duty entails that a vast majority of them spend a major part of their service away from their families wherein the spouses take over the caregiving roles for their children and their parents. Many of the military spouses from other rank backgrounds hail from similar towns and villages and enter cantonments probably for the first time after their marriage to the service personnel. Due to the demands of military service, spouses often happen to raise their children single-handedly during their developmental years looking after their educational and emotional needs along with managing innumerable other household responsibilities (Misra & Singh, 2014). Many military families in India with children studying in higher classes opt to stay away from the fathers' place of posting in smaller cities or remote cantonments due to inadequate schooling facilities at the posted locations. It was perceived by fathers in an Indian qualitative study that parental absence during crucial teenage years of their children's developmental age has an immense psychological impact which in turn leads to issues regarding unwanted child behaviour and impaired family dynamics (Sriram & Sarkar, 2019). One of the teachers in an Air Force school in the same study having many years of experience dealing with military-connected children mentioned that:-

“ A lot of control goes off in the Indian defence household, the father is usually seen as the stricter of the lot and maintains the structure and household. Moreover, the mothers of children of army personnel at lower positions, have somewhat low levels of awareness. Hence these growing boys and girls, mostly boys... very often take them for granted. Such children have irregular attendance, do not inform mothers about school activities or demands, get into habits of roaming around, and when caught, there is turmoil in the family and negative effect on the child. Children also miss school because all family functions happen when the men are available.”

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Extensive research evidence suggests that stressors due to military-related events may result in adverse outcomes for children during their developmental years. Developmental disruptions due to separations and relocations adversely impact children's mental health, emotional, behavioural, psychosocial and academic outcomes as brought out in many research studies, systematic and metanalytic reviews (see for review Card et al., 2011; Cramm et al., 2016; Creech et al., 2014; Cunitz et al., 2019; Kent et al., 2021; Moeller et al., 2015). Soldiers' deployment to a combat zone vs non-combat zone has been linked to the presence of higher stress levels and mental health problems among the family members (Faber et al., 2008; Kelley, 1994) wherein the safety of parents in combat zones emerges as one of the important concerns for military children (Huebner et al., 2007; Misra & Singh, 2014). Children with parents serving in combat zones and older children face a greater risk of substance abuse (Williamson et al., 2018), child neglect and maltreatment (Taylor et al., 2016), suicide ideation (Clements-Nolle et al., 2021) as well as secondary traumatization as a result of parental PTSD (Galovski & Lyons, 2004; King & Smith, 2016). Children of deployed or returning soldiers are vulnerable to maltreatment in the form of emotional abuse or both emotional and physical abuse or child neglect (Jellen et al., 2001; Rentz et al., 2007; Taylor et al., 2016). Deployment-related stressors have been seen to impair parenting practices through compromised problem-solving, reduced levels of encouragement to the child, lessened involvement in activities with children and increased levels of parental aversive and coercive behaviour (Gewirtz et al., 2011, 2016).

Various perspectives have been utilised to gain insight into child development in military families viz the stress models (wherein pile-up of stressors can lead to negative emotional and behavioural outcomes; McCubbin et al., 1980), resiliency building (various family intervention programs to foster resilience in children; Ann Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Mancini et al., 2020), Bronfenbrenner model of nested ecologies (child development takes place as an interactional influence of nested ecologies involving proximal and distal processes; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) or Ambiguous loss (wherein a family member may be physically present but psychologically absent or physically absent but psychologically present both of which situations may impede healthy patterns of development; Faber et al., 2008; Huebner et al., 2007b). Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory provides another relevant framework for understanding child development within the microsystem of parent-child relationships. His theory specifies consistent availability, caregiving and sensitive response of parents to children's needs during the early years towards the development of secure attachment relationships. However, when parents are non-responsive to children's emotional cues and do not respond promptly and adequately to their needs, it can lead to insecure attachments in the parent-child relationship (Ainsworth, 1979). Military children who experience repeated separations from their fathers may become circumspect in trusting the availability of fathers as a secure base (to venture out to explore the world) or as a safe haven (to retreat to when faced with threats). The fear of separation from the attachment figures and the way the separation phases are handled in military families play a significant role in the development of the children's socio-emotional outcomes and failure to effectively navigate the separations phases may lead to attachment disorders getting manifested in the form of conduct or behavioural disorders. In civilian samples, a strong correlation exists between secure parent-child attachment and positive developmental trajectory whereas an insecure attachment has been linked to an unhealthy child development (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). If secure parental attachments can provide a favourable model to build future relationships side, insecure attachments can lead to personality structures of lowered resilience and defective control, which can negatively

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respond to subsequent adverse events, like rejections, separations and losses. Continued or repetitive parental absences may threaten the child's concept of family as a secure base. Given the relevance of the attachment system to separation experiences and the long-term effects of attachment models throughout the lifespan, further research is needed to investigate attachment security in parent-child relationships in military families. Currently, there is a paucity of research linking military stressors with children's ability to use their parents as a secure base due to insecure attachments (Posada et al., 2011). It is important to understand how the parent-child relationship in the early years serves as a source of emotional security promoting healthy development across developmental domains and the lifespan (Cabrera, 2020; Cooke et al., 2019) especially within the military context.

Family Moves on Postings

Family Moves or "permanent change of station," is an intrinsic part of the military lifestyle. The regular tenure in any given station is of about 2-3 years although it is influenced by the nature of duty assignment (army courses, specialized training, deployments on specific missions etc). Frequent moves to new stations require children to repeatedly adjust to new schools and social environments which can help build resiliency in the military children (Sharma & Nagle, 2018). Sullivan (2019) suggested that a few military children considered geographic mobility as the most stressful aspect of growing up in a military family. Sriram & Sarkar (2019) found in their study of Indian military adolescents that losing old friendships, forging new friendships, and adjusting after a move was a stressful experience for them as well. The effects of moving to new places are more pronounced in children starting school for the first time or in adolescents struggling to separate from their parents and relying more on peer support at this stage of life. Bradshaw (2010) found delays in striking new friendships to be generally associated with feelings of loneliness, depression, and social alienation. Military fathers of 60 Indian adolescent boys and girls in grades tenth and twelfth perceived that frequent moves affected their children's academic performance which harmed children's self-esteem (Sriram & Sarkar, 2019).

A father highlighted the negative psychological impact on the children's adjustment to different languages and cultures in different parts of the country causing psychological issues like trauma or depression in children (Sriram & Sarkar, 2019). One of the most important concerns regarding moves was changes in academic programmes and schedules which influenced various facets of the child's behaviour and achievements. This concern had a major impact on parents due to the high value placed on academic success as the stepping stone to a brighter future for children in India.

However, in multiple other studies, many children perceive that frequent relocation results in a broader perspective toward people and cultures (Hanna, 2020; Sriram & Sarkar, 2019; Zurlinden et al., 2019). From a resilience perspective, school changes can create opportunities to promote resilience in children and those children who can explore different social relationships and develop new interests benefit from move-related changes (Ann Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Kelley et al., 2003). In a few studies, the impact of transitions on military children's ability to adapt to new environments was directly associated with parental distress level or emotional state (Kelley et al., 2003; Lester & Flake, 2013; Perreault et al., 2020). The use of technology and easy availability of mobile phones and video calls may foster a sense of connectedness to old friends and family members who are in different locations and help in overcoming the feeling of support networks and isolation in new stations. In their study, Landers-potts (2017) found that more than e-communication, it was

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direct interactions with others in the community and in school activities for military children which enabled the establishment of meaningful social connections and feeling needed by others in contrast to adolescent research (non-military youth) where e-communication provided means of solidifying and enhancing already-existing relationships and leading to higher levels of social support (the “rich get richer” hypothesis). Some military youth who feel more isolated and have less self-efficacy may utilize e-communication to make new friends which can interfere with their making effective real-life social connections with others. It has been seen that children coming from lower-ranked backgrounds who experience frequent school changes perceived greater social isolation and steps should be undertaken to negate the negative influence of psychosocial outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

Separations during Field postings/extended Training exercises/Deployments

In India, fathers' field postings, lead to adjustment issues in children beginning with a change in residence within the same station or moving to another station. Often families tend to stay back in separated family accommodations(SF) within the cantonments to ensure some level of organizational support, stability and security for children. Few working mothers change or leave their jobs to relocate near extended family members who can provide social and emotional support to the family. Many small cantonments owing to widespread geographic locations lack adequate educational opportunities which hinders the educational prospects of the children. This trade-off between choosing a cantonment with support networks at the expense of restricting child exposure to better areas of education and overall growth is a major cause of stress in families (Dixit, 2011). The household roles and responsibilities get reorganised among the family members in the absence of the father. The additional household roles and responsibilities during the separation phases can overly strain the coping abilities of ‘at home’ mothers who grapples with concerns about their husband's safety (Misra P, 2019). Prolonged gaps in parent-child communication during deployments in high-risk areas generates fear about fathers' safety and the well-being in children creating passive stress manifesting itself in the behavioural changes in the child's disposition. It is common to see the elder children in military families taking on some degree of roles and responsibilities of the absent parent. This additional layer of roles and responsibilities on grown-up or elder children does have positive effects like enabling new skill development or enhanced self-confidence in the children or a sense of contributing to the bigger family mission (Booth et al., 2007). Contrarily, it can also lead to a dilution of family boundaries with mothers' overdependence on elder children in ways which exceed the children's developmental capacities and burdens them with concerns they are ill-equipped to handle. In some cases, caring for the emotional needs of the mother in the absence of the father can lead to the concept of “Parentification” with adverse psychological outcomes in the long term (Harrison & Albanese, 2012; Hooper et al., 2014). Moreover, children who take on significant responsibilities during their father's absence can eventually miss out on opportunities to participate in age-appropriate activities which can hinder their overall development in many other ways (Huebner et al., 2007a). Multiple challenges are associated with the mother's dual role play to compensate for the father's absence while looking after the caregiving needs of young children and other aged members of the family. Some women conditioned towards deeply conservative family values in India tend to have an overdependence on sons which can lead to internalising or externalising behaviour problems in boys in the absence of a father figure. Challenges related to behavioural changes in children and their education emerge as prime concerns for Indian mothers who stay alone during various single/multiple field postings (Misra, 2019).

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Children who experience prolonged separations during the early years of their life may become reluctant to trust the availability of that parent. Thus, repeated separations challenge children's ability to develop confidence in their primary attachment figures which may inflict a significant emotional toll on them in the long term (Barker & Berry, 2009). Parental absence resulting in emotional uncertainty and ambiguity in the family has also been seen through the lens of "ambiguous loss" by Boss (2004) which was later applied to research on military adolescents by Huebner (2007). "Ambiguous loss" is particularly salient for military families as important family members are often either physically or emotionally absent due to the repetitive cycles of deployment. In a focus group-based Indian study on military adolescents dealing with fathers' deployment by Misra & Singh (2014), it was seen that communication using mobile phones and e-technology led to the 'psychological presence' of 'absent parents' which caused greater ambiguity and confusion in many adolescents. The disconnect in the parent-child communication can be seen in the following observation of a military child (Misra & Singh, 2014b) :

"My father tells from there..... to study English, opt for Maths, take coaching classes. If he had been here then he would understand that I can't study Maths with English & Hindi. How can I manage coaching, tuition everything. He would understand had he been here. There is no one to help. I study but he just is not convinced. Keeps giving instructions on the phone all the time"

Feelings of loss and role ambiguity for parents deployed in military duty are two major stressors/challenges experienced by Indian adolescents' (Misra & Singh, 2014). Loss is experienced in terms of missing father in everyday activities whereas ambiguous presence is felt due to the physical absence yet the psychological presence of the deployed parent which creates confusion and uncertainty in the children. Another scenario of the father being physically present and not giving enough time to the family is also a source of ambiguity and insecurity perceived by military children. Military children who face lesser levels of stressors within the same context (e.g. officer vs. below officers rank, fewer relocations, not having a parent deployed) generally report higher levels of psychological wellbeing (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014). In today's changing socio-economic scenario the impact of technology and access to internet-based resources is inescapable in all families. The over-dependence on internet-based gadgets in households with husband away on deployment is a ubiquitous present-day reality and its long-term negative implications need further research in the military milieu. During the separation period, setting limits and providing consistent discipline by the mother also gets affected. The absence of a father figure in military households may lead to lax disciplining by the mother who may be finding it hard to set limits on a child experiencing distress during a separation or simply because it may seem easier to give in on certain issues at the moment. While the mother acts as a buffer against the development of behavioural and emotional problems, her psychological well-being, aspirations, educational background and transitions into the Army way of life also play an integral role in children's behavioural, emotional, and sociopsychological and educational outcomes.

Dual military families with both parents serving in the Indian military are an emerging context and may benefit from increased financial resources due to two incomes and a broader network of social support. These families are also confronted with some of the above-mentioned challenges due to the need to secure caregiving arrangements which may require relocating their children, while the children may be faced with separation anxiety of

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having both parents absent due to military obligations. This is an emerging context which also needs further investigation.

Reintegration of Families After Field Postings/Deployments

The process of returning of the soldiers after completion of field tenures and resuming previous domestic routines requires the families to slowly re-establish their roles, responsibilities and working conditions which may create undue stress within the family systems. The father may return home and feel the need to be strict to re-establish previous rules and their role as an authority figure in the family (Dayton et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2014) or find it challenging to say “no” to children's demands having been absent from their life or be guilty about an upcoming move and may inadvertently undermine the other's parent's effort to maintain order within the family (Adams et al., 1990; Mancini et al., 2020). After the initial euphoria of having their fathers back, children need to adjust to the change in parents' personalities owing to the stressors the soldiers have undergone in the intervening period. The extent of family cohesion determines the ease of role transitioning of every family member (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Mothers have to return from being dual-parent to the children whereas the children may feel reluctant to give up their increased autonomy. The returning father may feel displaced in his role as the head of the family and want to reclaim back his caregiver and authority figure role again (Huebner et al., 2007b; Lowe et al., 2012; Misra & Singh, 2014a; Russotti et al., 2016). Occupational stressors such as staying away from family members in isolated areas or operating in life-threatening circumstances may predispose the soldiers to various kinds of behavioural disorders or substance abuse in the form of alcohol dependence. Trauma due to injury/loss of life/limb or loss of a comrade in the nature of duty also impacts a soldier's interactions with his family (Cozza, 2016). Children may be emotionally affected when the father's trauma symptoms interfere with his ability to parent. PTSD symptoms suffered by returning service members interfere with their ability to engage in interactions with their children that allow them to re-establish and maintain an emotional connection (Bello-utu & Desocio, 2015). Such changes may give rise to unpredictable or upsetting parental behaviours that are distressing to a child. How the family of a soldier copes with his trauma and behavioural problems and its impact on a child's coping requires investigation of the existing cultural context.

CONCLUSION

The nature of military service is inherently risky. Research on military youth has shown that developmental age, gender and military contextual variables are associated with emotional and behavioural outcomes. Children from Indian military backgrounds are at risk for social, psychological, emotional and behavioural health concerns as a result of constant instability due to moves, separations and a sense of the ambiguous presence of serving parents. A decrease in interaction with a deployed parent along with enhanced attachment to the mother can disrupt secure bonding with the absent parent. Other issues like alcoholism, child neglect and secondary traumatisations due to parental injuries or mental health concerns are aspects which need to be investigated in Indian military families. To meet the unique needs of military children, intervention needs and policy programs should account for the context in which military children thrive, which has unique characteristics and demands compared with the civilian world. Pilot program initiatives should be targeted towards the characteristic needs of military children rather than overestimating similarities between civilian and military children. Identification of military stressors, understanding their impact on children and designing intervention strategies would promote this population's development as a nation's resource pool. These intervention programs must be designed to

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account for the typical needs of the military family in aspects like parent education and guidance to enhance parenting practices and attachment issues, timely counselling services for children facing depression or anxiety during various transition points, generating awareness in schools about unique stressors for military children and strengthening youth reach programs based on the identified needs. Systematic utilization of e-technology, mobile-based mental health applications or web-based approaches to provide service to military families will aid in building resilience in the military children, which in turn can enhance our soldiers' morale and fighting potential.

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