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**What are the best and worst things about  
having a father in UK Armed Forces?**

**Analysis of free text responses**

PROOFS

## **ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** This study aims to explore what adolescents report as the best and worst aspects of having a father in the UK military.

**Methods:** Qualitative data were collected from 171 adolescents aged 11-16 years, via an online survey exploring the impact of paternal military service on childhood wellbeing (response rate = 70%). Questions about the best and worst aspects of their father's military role were examined. Content analysis has been used to code the qualitative data into themes.

**Results:** 85 girls and 86 boys were included with a mean age of 13 years (standard deviation (SD) 1.92). The results showed lack of contact as the single most commonly reported negative factor of having a father in the military (61%). Positive aspects of their fathers' job most frequently reported included a sense of pride (25%) and financial benefits (25%).

**Conclusions:** Adolescents take a great deal of pride in their father's jobs in the military, and they enjoy the financial benefits. A majority, however, feel a lack of contact with their father is the most negative factor.

## KEY MESSAGES

- Impact on child mental health and social well-being is an important consequence of work in the military
- Adolescents acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of their fathers working in the military
- Lack of contact is the single most reported consequence of military work
- Adolescents most commonly report pride and financial benefits as the most positive aspects of their fathers work

PROOFS

## INTRODUCTION

The number of children who have a parent in the UK military is estimated to be just over 50,000.<sup>[1]</sup> The lifestyle of these children involves moving to new places as their mothers or fathers are given new assignments and recent reviews have found an increase in emotional and behavioural problems in children when a parent was deployed.<sup>[2, 3]</sup> Deployment-related family stresses such as absence of their father's for long periods, or fear of injury to their loved ones, are a commonly occurring part of their lives.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Royal Marines Children's Fund recently undertook a project where several positive aspects of being part of the Service community were identified.<sup>[5]</sup> The findings suggested that children and young adults (under the age of 25 years) often take a great deal of pride, identity and belonging from their parent's role in the UK Armed Forces. Service children often learn to be more adaptable, easily making friends and having a sense of perspective gained from living as a part of multiple communities.<sup>[5]</sup>

The current study aims to assess what adolescents report as the best and worst thing about having a father in UK Armed Forces. Provision of an opportunity for the participants to express themselves (via free-text boxes), allows a more in-depth qualitative analysis than has been undertaken in the past.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Fathers who were part of an already existing cohort founded by the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR),<sup>[6]</sup> undertook an online questionnaire and telephone interview, and following this the mothers of their children were invited to participate and complete an online questionnaire. Participating mothers were asked to provide consent for the research team to contact their children (aged 11-16 years) to invite them to participate in an online survey. From the 397 mothers that participated, consent was given to invite 249 of their children aged 11-16 years to participate in the study. A response was obtained from 176 children (a response rate of 70.7%) (Figure 1). Two children were excluded due to missing data leaving valid responses from 174 children (response rate=70%) (Figure 1). 88 girls and 86 boys were included with an age range of 11 to 16 years, a mean age of 13 years old (standard deviation (SD) = 1.92 years) 171 of these responses were taken forward for analysis due to incomplete data (n = 3), leaving 85 girls and 86 boys.

### **Data collection**

Data collection began in July 2010 and ended in October 2012. If consent was provided, children were sent an information pack about the study, a consent form (for 16 year olds) or an assent form (for those under 16 years). Data were collected using a self-report online questionnaire. The children's questionnaire consisted of various questions including 'what is the worst thing about having a father in the UK Armed Forces?' and 'what is the best thing about having a father in the UK Armed Forces', thereby allowing the children to give a free-text response? The fathers' online questionnaires provided data on the age and gender of their children.

## **Qualitative analysis**

An inductive content analysis has been used,<sup>[7]</sup> targeted at two questions: the “best thing” and “worst thing” about having a military father. Inductive content analysis depends on inductive reasoning, which has allowed themes to emerge from the raw data, through repeated examination and comparison.<sup>[8]</sup> After familiarisation with the responses, themes were developed based on the most commonly occurring words. A coding scheme was developed via discussion between two of the authors (NTF and VJ). This was originally trialled on a sample of 20 responses, and then applied to the full sample (n= 171).

Subsequently, all the responses were analysed individually and allocated to a particular theme. Responses that were similar or drew out the same concept were grouped together into one theme. This process was repeated three times. All authors agreed upon the final coding scheme after revisions were made regarding the categorization of some data. This scheme comprised 13 themes, of which eight themes for the best thing about their father’s job in the UK Armed Forces, and five for the worst thing.

The qualitative data available varied by respondent, some responses were in full sentences and others just a few words. Three percent of the respondents (n=5) answered “I can’t remember”. There were 12 respondents who left blank the worst thing about their fathers job, and 5 the best thing. Only those who left both questions blank, or responded “don’t remember” to both were completely excluded (n=3). Eight responses (5%) contained more than one answer to the question (5 responses for best and 3 for worst thing about having a military father), and where this was the case the first answer was coded.

## **RESULTS**

### **Best thing about father being in the UK Armed Forces**

A total of 166 responses were analysed for this question. Of the original 171 used in analysis, 5 failed to respond to this part of the questionnaire. Financial benefits, along with pride/respect for the job are the most common responses (25% each) (Table 1). Moving homes was recorded as the next most popular response (21%). Some (12%) recalled the opportunity to learn new things as the best part of their father's job. Less common themes were: being part of the military community (5%), father's love for the job (4%), and feeling safe (1%). A small proportion stated that nothing was good about their father's job (7%) (Table 1).

### **Worst thing about father being in the UK Armed Forces**

The most noteworthy theme reported was lack of contact (61%) (Table 2). 18% of the responses stated that there was nothing bad about their father's job, with many claiming to be used to the long periods away. Although relocating was reported as one of the best things about their father's job, a similar number of children saw it as a negative (16%). A few (3%) described the long-term impact of a life in the Armed Forces as the worst feature of a military career, and the same percentage were worried about their father's safety on deployment (Table 2).



**Table 1 –Best aspect of father's job in the UK Armed Forces (n=166)**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of responses n (%)</b>	<b>Example of responses</b>
<b>Financial benefits</b>	41 (25%)	<p>“We get to go to good schools because of the discount that dad gets from the Army.”</p> <p>“It provides my family with a relatively secure source of income in today's unstable economic climate.”</p> <p>“Steady income.”</p>
<b>Sense of pride</b>	41 (25%)	<p>“That he's a hero and he's saving people's lives.”</p> <p>“That he fights for the country and helps people.”</p> <p>“I'm proud of him, where he's been and what he's seen.”</p>
<b>Relocating</b>	36 (21%)	<p>“Living in different places.”</p> <p>“I get to travel to different places and meet different people.”</p> <p>“Meet loads of friends (still in touch with some) been to lots of houses and been to different countries.”</p>
<b>Learning new things</b>	19 (12%)	<p>“Insight into how the Air Force works.”</p> <p>“Past experiences. I have done and seen things most people wouldn't get to do and it's been really fun and exciting and an adventure.”</p> <p>“You learn things about the military that others don't know and may never know.”</p>
<b>Nothing</b>	12 (7%)	<p>“Nothing good about it.”</p>
<b>Military community</b>	8 (5%)	<p>“Go to events where we meet people in the Army and other families.”</p>
<b>Father's happiness</b>	7 (4%)	<p>“It makes him happy.”</p>
<b>Feeling safe</b>	2 (1%)	<p>“He is protecting us.”</p>

**Table 2 -Worst aspect of father's job (n=159)**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of responses (%)</b>	<b>Example of responses</b>
<b>Lack of contact</b>	97 (61%)	<p>"I don't like it when he goes away for long periods of time because I miss him."</p> <p>"Him never being around. He's missed most of my childhood."</p> <p>"He has quite long hours so we don't see him much and he is sometimes posted in foreign places and we don't see him for ages."</p>
<b>Nothing</b>	27 (17%)	<p>"No, it has always been part of my life and I am used to it."</p> <p>"None."</p>
<b>Relocating</b>	25 (16%)	<p>"That we have to leave friends and family behind when we move."</p> <p>"Moving all the time, never get to make any friends or be close with someone or have a relationship because you know that you will just have to leave."</p> <p>"Moving around and going to different schools."</p>
<b>Fear for safety</b>	5 (3%)	<p>"Not knowing that he is safe and that he won't get hurt by criminals."</p> <p>"He might get injured."</p> <p>"I don't like seeing him go to war because it is hard to think that he might not come back."</p>
<b>Long term impact on father</b>	5 (3%)	<p>"Sometimes I think some of the things he's seen disturb him more than he says."</p> <p>"The long term effects it's had on him."</p>

## **DISCUSSION**

This study looked at how adolescents viewed the role of their father in the UK military using free text responses to a questionnaire. The key findings were that lack of contact was reported as the predominant factor negatively affecting children, while financial benefits and a sense of pride were most commonly reported as the positive benefits.

### **Comparison with the literature**

A RAND Corporation study (conducted in 2009) found that children in military families face certain emotional challenges. In particular, having a parent deployed for a long period of time was the most important factor associated with whether military children would struggle in their personal lives.<sup>[9]</sup> This is consistent with our findings, as lack of contact was shown to be the most commonly reported negative aspect of having a military father.

Existing literature does indicate that children can be impacted in a positive way by their parents' military roles. Service children continue to attain academic achievements surpassing the national standard.<sup>[2]</sup> They often build strong bonds in their communities, shouldering extra responsibility while their serving parent is away.<sup>[10]</sup> A recent paper explains that when children move around every few years with the Army, it is possible for familiar faces to 'often turn up in new places'.<sup>[11]</sup> This is discussed as a positive aspect of forces life where, in schools with a majority of pupils from Service families, children have similar experiences to share with each other. This beneficial feeling of being part of a close-knit military community was recalled as the best aspect of military life by a small fraction of participants in our current study (4%).

## **Strengths and Limitations of the study**

Strengths of the study stem from the fact that both negative and positive views of participants are explored. The study has a relatively large sample size, a high response rate (70%), and the respondents were asked to write their responses in a free text box. Where there were multiple answers in the free text box, the first response was coded. Slightly different results may have emerged if all responses were included in the analysis, however, only eight respondents reported multiple answers.

Besides the strengths of the current study there are also limitations to consider.

Firstly, adolescents may have hesitated to write negative answers, as they feared for their father's career. However, the information sheet sent out to everyone clearly stated the aims and objectives of the project and the research team being independent from the Ministry of Defence. Secondly, an age range of 11-16 years meant that we could not analyse responses of younger children, to see if they are impacted differently to adolescents, by their father's jobs. Thirdly, the questionnaire was completed online, making it impossible to ascertain whether children completed the survey by themselves or not. If those around the child influenced responses, this may have affected the validity of the results, but such a limitation is difficult to overcome when collecting data online. Finally, there were limitations relating to the application of the coding scheme, as this was done by one person<sup>[12]</sup>. This makes the grouping of the data more prone to human error, decreasing its reliability.<sup>[13]</sup> In order to reduce such inaccuracies the coding scheme was developed by collaboration with one of the other authors and then discussed with all authors and although applied by just one person, this was done three times on three separate occasions .

## **Future directions**

Studies must explore the extent to which a child is affected by certain aspects of the military life by employing both qualitative and quantitative measures to assess exactly how much a child feels each factor of military life impacts their daily lives. A simple way to do this for instance would be to add a numerical severity scale on the questionnaire – where a high number on one of the negative aspects of military life meaning the child finds this factor so significant that it greatly impacts on their daily life in a detrimental way. A more in-depth qualitative study should be attempted, perhaps with interviews, using the same approach as this one; to target the children and adolescents themselves, rather than the parents, in order to further understand their hardships and how best to try and address them.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Adolescents seem to report numerous things as the best thing about having a father in the UK Armed Forces, with no clear majority reporting one particular issue. However, a significant majority did report a lack of contact with their father as the most negative aspect of their father's military role.

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