Social Stressors, Coping Behaviors, and Depressive Symptoms: A Latent Profile Analysis of Adolescents in Military Families


SUMMARY: Adolescents in military families deal with stressors experienced by all adolescents as well as stressors inherent to having a Service member as a parent. This study explored the coping styles used by adolescents in Active Duty Army families. Findings suggest four unique coping strategies that were related to adolescents’ adjustment.

KEY FINDINGS:
- Researchers identified four coping styles of adolescents in Active Duty Army families: disengaged (i.e., typically did not engage in many coping behaviors), troubled (i.e., tended to engage in mostly coping behaviors oriented toward other people), humor-intensive (i.e., were most likely to use humor as a coping strategy), and active (i.e., frequently engaged in all adaptive coping behaviors).
- Adolescents were most likely to engage in active coping (40%) or humor-intensive coping (32%), which were associated with the lowest levels of symptoms of depression.
- The use of troubled coping (by 24% of adolescents) was most strongly associated with increased symptoms of depression, while disengaged coping (used by 4% of adolescents) was associated with slightly increased symptoms of depression.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:
Programs could:
- Develop strengths-based programming for adolescents in military families that focuses on building resilience and adaptive coping strategies
- Offer classes that teach parents in military families how to encourage their adolescents to use adaptive coping strategies
- Create a mentoring program for military-connected youth in which youth can foster positive relationships with adults who can help them negotiate challenging situations

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:
Policies could:
- Recommend training for professionals who work with military-connected youth regarding adaptive coping strategies
- Promote the development of programs that enhance the resilience of adolescents in military families
- Continue to support programs that help families as they encounter military-related stressors (e.g., relocations, deployment)

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METHODS
- Participants were recruited from U.S. Army Installations in the U.S. and Europe through flyers, emails, radio announcements, and verbal announcements during family programs.
- Surveys with questions about coping styles, sources of stress, and depressive symptoms were completed in a computer lab on the installations.
- Data were analyzed to determine what types of coping styles were used and the relationship between coping styles and depressive symptoms.

PARTICIPANTS
- Participants were 1,036 youth between 11 and 18 years old who had at least one parent who was an Active Duty Soldier.
- Most (72%) of the sample were younger adolescents (between 11 and 14 years old), with 50% males and 50% females.
- The adolescents were White (37%); Black (19%); Latino (11%); Native American (2%); Multiracial (20%); or another race/ethnicity (9%). There seems to be missing information from 2% of participants.

LIMITATIONS
- Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data collected, it is unclear whether certain coping styles caused increased symptoms of depression, or increased symptoms of depression caused the use of certain coping styles.
- Most participants lived on an Army installation; results may not be able to be generalized to those who do not live on an installation or those who are connected to a different military branch.
- Researchers did not collect data regarding family structure, so it is unclear whether findings are limited to adolescents in certain types of families.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Utilize a longitudinal design to discover the long-term impact of certain coping styles
- Replicate this research with adolescents in military families connected to other branches or living off of military installations
- Collect information about adolescents' family structure and examine its possible role in the use of different coping styles

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design: Excellent
Methods: Excellent
Limitations: Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
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