Impact of the Threat of War on Children in Military Families


This study provides a descriptive analysis (including chi-square and ANOVAs) of active-duty, reserve, and civilian children’s perceptions of war, levels of anxiety, coping strategies, and emotional problems. To collect these data, the author used child self-report surveys, a structured interview, and a projective human figure drawing assessment.

Key Findings:

- No differences were found among children of civilian, active-duty, and reserve families on anxiety, emotional problems, or number of coping strategies used.
- Active duty children were more likely to “fight with someone,” “bite my nails,” or “daydream” to cope with stress as compared to reserve children; whereas, reserve children were more likely to “do something about it” (no specific action specified) as a coping strategy as compared to active-duty children.
- Active-duty children were more likely to obtain information about the war from teachers or movies rather than from their parents as compared to reserve or civilian children.
- Reserve and civilian children were more likely to state that war “was not right” as compared to active-duty children; but active-duty children were more likely to fear that their parent would die.

Implications for Programs:

- During well-child visits military health care providers may include the suggestion and or materials to help parents ask discuss their children’s perception of the war and the impact of war on their family.
- Programs designed for military children and deployment may place focused attention on providing opportunities for children to talk about their fears and process their feelings concerning deployment and war in general.

Implications for Policies:

- Military children may benefit from programs that teach a variety of strategies to help them cope effectively with deployment and fears related to war. Networks and referrals systems between organizations may be implemented to link children and families to appropriate services.
- To better provide support for children, schools may consider providing additional training to teachers to help them recognize signs of anxiety, stress, and other emotional problems. Schools may also consider implementing evidence-based Socio-emotional programs to assist all children build healthy coping strategies.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future research exploring children’s perceptions of war, coping strategies, and mental health outcomes should include larger representative samples.
- A validated self-report instrument to measure children’s perceptions of war is necessary.
- Future research should link anxiety and coping measures, and children’s perceptions of war, with outcome measures such as psychosomatic symptoms and emotional and behavioral problems.

Prepared by Military REACH Team.
For additional information, please visit http://reachmilitaryfamilies.arizona.edu
Background Information

Methodology:
- Frequencies, percentages, chi-square, and ANOVA were used to describe and compare civilian, reserve, and active component children’s perceptions of war, anxiety, emotional problems, and coping strategies.
- Open ended, structured interviews and human figure drawings were analyzed to assess the children’s fears.

Participants:
- Participants were in three groups, civilian ($N = 48$), active-duty ($N = 18$), and reserve ($N = 25$) children.
- 55% were male, 89% White; 5% Black; 2% Hispanic; 2% Mixed; and 1% unknown.

Limitations:
- Selected children may differ from non-participants in a way that is not measured, but affected the outcome variables. For example; parents who refused permission for their children to participate may have been quite different from parents who gave their permission. Perhaps their children are more fearful than the children who participated in the study.
- Conclusions based on a small sample may not be appropriate for the larger population. In addition, the small number in the active-duty group ($N=18$) fell short of the 23 required to detect a medium size effect.

Assessing Research that Works

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Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications

Overall Quality Rating: ★★★