



## **RESEARCHING THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ARMED FORCES FAMILIES**

### Executive Summary

This paper summarises findings from a PhD study, which was collaboratively funded by ESRC and Forces Children Scotland and completed at the University of Stirling. The research addresses an important gap in existing research that directly solicits the views of children and young people from armed forces families. It employed a suite of qualitative methods to explore how children expressed their experiences. A total of 41 children and young people aged 8 to 14 years, from 3 primary and 2 secondary schools across Scotland, participated in the research.

The research questions that emerged from the identified gaps in the literature and guided the analysis of the data were:

1. What are the most significant features of children's descriptions of their experiences of having a parent in the armed forces?
2. How do children describe themselves in relation to being part of an armed forces family?
3. What do children's accounts suggest about school-based support for children from forces families?

### Findings

Significant features of children's accounts: Parental absence and moving school

All the children and young people described parental absence and moving school as important features of belonging to an armed forces family. Most often, children discussed the challenges and emotion associated with these experiences. The research found differences in the ways that primary school children and secondary school young people expressed their experiences. Primary children's accounts highlighted how they used objects to foster comforting, sensory connections with their absent parent.



Young people in the secondary schools found it difficult to discuss their experiences of parental absence without discussing the experiences of individual family members or how they responded to the absence collectively as a family. In addition, whilst children's accounts focussed more on the social aspects of moving school (e.g. making new friends) rather than academic concerns, there was some evidence that moving school could influence how young people identify as learners (e.g. perceptions of their academic strengths and weaknesses). A unique insight was the significance of the armed forces in children's accounts of their experiences; children experienced their lives as being shaped by the practices of the armed forces, often working to constrain the choices children felt were available to them and their family. Ultimately, given the relational focus of children's accounts, the thesis argues that it is essential to understand and approach children's experiences within the context of their everyday lives.

## Identifications of belonging to an armed forces family are multiple and shifting

The research found that the children participating in the research identified differently with being part of an armed forces family. For some of the children, this was an important aspect of their lives and strongly associated with how they felt and made sense of their experiences. Children's identifications also shifted throughout the research and in response to both the people and environment of the research meeting, providing some initial insight into the contexts of children's lives that may shape children's expression of identity in relation to belonging to an armed forces family. The findings suggest that the significance attached to having a parent in the forces is both multiple and shifting.

## Opportunities for expression

The study found that prior to participating in the research, many of the children had had little opportunity to explore and reflect on their experiences of being part of an armed forces family. There was also evidence that participating in the research had provided opportunities to reflect and sometimes reflect differently on having a parent in the armed forces. Overall, children seemed to value the opportunity and be keen for further opportunities to discuss being part of an armed forces family.



## Uneven provision of support

There was evidence that the children experienced variability in the level and nature of support available to them within their school. The children's accounts of the school-based support they had experienced were also unevenly spread across the participating schools. In all schools, there was room to improve the consistency and coordination of the support offered to children from forces families.

## Recognition is important

Using children's reflections about participating in the research and their accounts of school-based support they had experienced, the research identified that recognition was an important feature of support in school. Children experienced the support from their school as positive when it recognised them as belonging to an armed forces family and the experiences they may be facing.

## Implications

Schools can and should do more to support children from forces families. There is scope for schools to positively contribute to the experiences of children from forces families through:

1. Increasing awareness and understanding amongst teachers and school staff of the distinctive experiences that children from forces families may face
2. Enhancing opportunities for dialogue with and between pupils that encourage expression as well as new reflections about their experiences
3. Working collaboratively with parents, wider community and the armed forces to improve understanding and identify new possibilities for action

## Next Steps

A more substantial research briefing will be created to enable Forces Children Scotland to disseminate findings from the research with partners. I plan to publish articles that will contribute to the evidence base on children from forces families and support the charity to consider the implications for their Educational Programme.

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