

Resiliency in the face of adversity: Adult children of Canadian Armed Forces Veterans tell their stories— Implications for program and policy development.



Principal Investigator

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Dr. Deborah Norris of the Family Studies and Gerontology Department at Mount Saint Vincent University knows well the trials and triumphs of military family life. She's made it her life's work to research these challenges, which have had a powerful impact on programs, policy, and people. Dr. Norris' military family research program includes studies focusing on the impact of operational stress injuries on the mental health and well-being of families of Veterans, resilience and post-traumatic growth in military families, and the military to civilian transition.

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Project Summary and Impact

Children of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) parents are expected to adjust to a military lifestyle that often includes stress connected to frequent moves, parental deployment, and worry about their parent's safety in combat. Despite these tensions, some children develop positive coping strategies. They do this by learning to organize, problem-solve and work through daily household tasks and responsibilities. In turn, these skills positively extend to other parts of the child's life by improving self-confidence and comfort with new situations, fostering a sense of belonging and developing stronger family and community connections. Hence, children of CAF parents can be resilient in the face of adversity. What is not known, however, is whether the skills and strategies that children of CAF parents developed during childhood continue into adulthood. To learn more, Dr. Norris and her team listened to the stories of over twenty adult children of CAF parents (now Veterans) who served in the Korean and Gulf Wars. Participants reflected on how growing up on military bases both benefited and challenged their families, and the types of resources that were available at the time.

Common themes of this research surround ideas of resilience, community impact and family relationships. Participants reported having to learn how to adjust during constant change. They talked about developing coping strategies to manage the unavoidability of relocation, separation, and risk. Some described relocation as a normal part of military family life. Others said

With funding from the Canadian Institute of Military and Veteran Health Research True Patriot Love (TPL) Research Initiative the Families Matter Research Group is working to improve research capacity and partnerships so that the families of those who serve, or who have served, across the military and public safety sectors, are getting the support that they need in a timely manner.

their parents framed relocation as an adventure, which, in turn, was how they saw and experienced it. Other participants talked about developing empathy in relation to relocating. These participants described themselves as more tolerant and compassionate because they had a shared identity of being the “new kid.” This identity also led them to feel a sense of belonging and safety as part of a big “military” family. Although most participants agreed that changing schools was stressful and sometimes adjustments needed to be made, especially for children with special needs, they described themselves as good students.

Participants described the quality of their parent-child relationship as varied. Some families were impacted by undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder and alcoholism, yet participants countered their parents’ struggles with positive traits. Parents were frequently described as being, “responsible,” “fair,” and “hard-working.” Communication played a key role in how the parent-child relationship evolved. Although harsh discipline and the spillover of the military approach to family problems created distance and resentment, parents who respected and talked to their children helped them cope with separation.

Key Findings

- **Resilience:** Participants became skilled at adjusting during constant change, learning to cope with adversity, and developing strategies to manage relocation and separation.
- **Sense of community:** Participants felt a sense of having a shared identity and belonging to a big “military” family. They were proud of their parents’ service, and many were motivated to choose careers in public service, including the military.
- **Family relationships:** Parents who respected and communicated with their children helped them cope with separation better than those who used harsh, authoritarian approaches to resolving family problems.

What Now?

Dr. Deborah Norris and her team will be making policy recommendations to develop strength-based family support programs that focus on children. A key consideration for such support programs comes from recognizing the impact that parents’ military service has on their children.

“People shared childhood memories of the pride they felt seeing their parents going to work, knowing that they were serving their country. That sense of pride trickled down into the family unit and ultimately shaped children’s identity into adulthood” Dr. Norris explained. “Over half of the adult children we spoke to deliberately chose careers in public service. Some went into the military, but others went into public service positions and government, where they could serve their country.”

The Families Matter Research Group is an interdisciplinary team of clinicians and scientists whose research focuses on the needs of the families of Canadian Armed Forces members, Veterans and public safety personnel. Some of this research surround topics such as mental health, post-traumatic stress, operational stress, work-family conflict and trauma.

Funding Sponsor



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True Patriot Love Foundation (TPL) is a national charity dedicated to providing essential support and resources to Canadian military members, Veterans and their families. TPL believes in supporting research, establishing evidence-based programs, and increasing access to programs and treatments dedicated to advancing the health and well-being of military personnel, Veterans, and their families.



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