



Growing Up a Military Brat

The Lifelong Effects of a Military Childhood

A Childhood Unlike Most Others

For millions of American children, growing up in a military family means accepting a way of life that most civilian youngsters seldom experience. They change homes and schools, make new friends, say goodbye to old ones, and sometimes spend months separated from a parent whose military obligations take precedence over family life. To outsiders, such a childhood might seem unsettled or even traumatic. To military children, however, it is often simply normal life.

I spent more than 24 years in the United States Navy, and both my children were born while I was on active duty. They grew up in military housing, accompanied us on an overseas assignment to Scotland, and eventually moved across the United States when the Navy transferred me to California. During our assignment in Scotland, both attended local schools and adapted remarkably well. My daughter even acquired a Scottish accent, much to the annoyance of her older brother, while my son joined a Boy Scout troop sponsored by my ship.

Neither seemed particularly troubled by our frequent changes of scenery. They made friends, participated in community activities, and appeared ready to move on when another set of orders arrived. Looking back, however, I sometimes wonder how much that upbringing influenced the adults they eventually became.

Military children have long been affectionately called "military brats," a designation many proudly embrace. But the nickname raises a serious question: Does a childhood characterized by frequent moves, temporary friendships, and periodic family separations create unusually resilient adults, or can it leave emotional consequences that persist long after the military years are over?

Research suggests the answer is more complicated than either possibility alone.

The Constant Cycle of Moving and Starting Over

One of the defining characteristics of military childhood is mobility. Career military families may relocate every few years, sometimes crossing the country or moving overseas. Each transfer means adjusting to a different home, school, neighborhood, and social environment.

For children, the consequences extend beyond packing household belongings. A move may interrupt academic progress, separate them from close friends, or force them to abandon sports teams and other activities. Older children can find these disruptions particularly difficult because friendships and peer acceptance become increasingly important during adolescence.

Yet frequent relocation may also offer opportunities. Military children often encounter different cultures, customs, educational environments, and ways of life. A youngster who attends school in Scotland, Germany, Japan, or another overseas location may acquire a broader understanding of the world than someone who spends an entire childhood in one community.

The critical distinction is that **adaptability is not necessarily the same as emotional resilience**. A child may become very good at adjusting to new surroundings while still experiencing sadness, loneliness, or anxiety about leaving familiar people behind. Parents should recognize both possibilities rather than assuming that a child who appears cheerful about moving has no reservations.

Making Friends Is Easy; Keeping Them Can Be Hard

Perhaps the most lasting social challenge of military childhood involves friendships.

Most children gradually establish a network of friends through school, neighborhood activities, sports, and shared experiences. These relationships often develop over many years. Military children, by contrast, may have only a year or two to establish friendships before another transfer interrupts them.

Repeated moves can encourage children to become socially resourceful. They learn to introduce themselves, join unfamiliar groups, and find common interests with strangers. Some develop remarkable confidence in new situations because they have practiced starting over so often.

But there may be another side to that adaptability. A child who repeatedly experiences the loss of close friendships may begin to regard relationships as temporary. Why become deeply attached to someone when another move may be just around the corner?

That possibility should not be mistaken for an established psychological consequence. Research has identified social adjustment challenges among some military children, but it has not demonstrated that frequent relocation inevitably produces difficulty maintaining adult friendships.

Nevertheless, the distinction between making friends and keeping them deserves attention. Parents can help by encouraging children to preserve meaningful relationships across moves.

Today's video calls, messaging services, and online communities make maintaining contact considerably easier than it was when long-distance telephone calls and handwritten letters were the principal means of communication.

Where Is Home?

Ask a civilian adult where they grew up, and the answer is often a town or neighborhood. Ask someone raised in a career military family, and the answer may require a short geography lesson.

For military children, home can become less a particular location than a collection of familiar people, possessions, traditions, and experiences. A family that celebrates holidays together, maintains familiar routines, and provides emotional security can offer continuity even when its address changes every few years.

Military installations can also provide a reassuring sense of familiarity. Commissaries, exchanges, schools, recreational facilities, and military neighborhoods share certain characteristics regardless of their geographical location. Children may find that military communities provide a recognizable social environment even when the surrounding civilian culture is unfamiliar.

On the other hand, some military children may reach adulthood without a strong attachment to any particular hometown. They may feel comfortable living almost anywhere, or they may develop an especially strong desire to establish permanent roots.

Neither response is necessarily unhealthy. A person's sense of belonging can come from family, friendships, community, occupation, or shared values as readily as from geography.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Researchers have devoted considerable attention to the emotional and behavioral well-being of military children, particularly during periods of deployment. The findings are mixed, and they caution against broad generalizations.

A 2018 systematic review published in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* examined nine studies comparing military-connected children with civilian children. Overall, the researchers found that military children did not consistently demonstrate poorer well-being than their civilian counterparts. However, older children and those experiencing parental deployments showed greater risks of certain adjustment difficulties.

A separate 2019 meta-analysis found that parental deployment was associated with increased emotional and behavioral difficulties among some children, particularly symptoms of anxiety and depression. The differences were generally small to moderate, and the findings did not establish that every military child would experience such problems.

The RAND Corporation's longitudinal Deployment Life Study followed military families before, during, and after deployments. Its findings suggested that most measured child and adolescent

outcomes remained relatively stable across the deployment cycle. Family communication, preparation, and the psychological well-being of parents emerged as important considerations.

These studies reveal something important: military childhood presents distinctive challenges, but it does not automatically produce emotional or psychological difficulties.

There is also a significant limitation to the research. Most studies examine children and adolescents while their parents are serving. Relatively few follow those children into middle age or later adulthood. Consequently, researchers cannot yet provide definitive answers about how a military upbringing influences lifelong friendships, marriage, career choices, or psychological health.

What Happens When Military Brats Become Adults?

This is perhaps the most intriguing question of all.

Does a childhood spent moving from place to place encourage adults to seek adventure and new experiences? Does it make them more willing to relocate for employment? Or does it produce the opposite response—a desire to remain in one community and establish the permanent relationships that childhood sometimes interrupted?

Both possibilities are reasonable, but neither should be treated as inevitable.

Some adults raised in military families may find travel and relocation less intimidating because unfamiliar surroundings were a normal part of childhood. Others may value permanence precisely because they experienced so much change during their formative years.

Adult relationships raise similar questions. Repeated childhood separations might influence how some individuals approach emotional attachment, but personalities, family relationships, subsequent experiences, and individual choices also play important roles.

Researchers have begun examining the relationships and emotional experiences of adults raised in military households, but this remains a developing field. Existing findings cannot establish that a military upbringing determines marital success, emotional security, or the ability to form lasting friendships.

An unhappy marriage, difficulty maintaining friendships, or a preference for solitude should not automatically be attributed to military childhood. Such experiences are common among civilians as well.

Two Children, Two Different Journeys

My own children offer a modest illustration of how differently individuals raised in the same military household may approach adulthood.

After graduating from San Diego State University, my daughter sailed a 40-foot sailboat through the Panama Canal, established a charter boat business in the Dominican Republic, and eventually

settled in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where she has operated a wedding business for many years. My son chose a different course. He joined the Army, later used his GI Bill educational benefits to earn an MBA from Arizona State University, and eventually established his home near us, where he enjoys a settled family life.

Both experienced the same Navy household, overseas assignment, and frequent relocations. Yet their adult lives followed markedly different paths. Did their military upbringing contribute to their independence, adaptability, or career choices? Perhaps. But countless other influences undoubtedly shaped their decisions.

Their experiences illustrate an important point: growing up in a military family does not produce a particular kind of adult. It provides a distinctive set of childhood experiences from which different individuals build different lives.

The Advantages of a Military Childhood

Discussions about military children sometimes concentrate so heavily on the difficulties of relocation and separation that they overlook the potential advantages.

Children raised in military families may experience different cultures, learn to navigate unfamiliar environments, and develop confidence in meeting new people. Overseas assignments can expose them to languages, customs, and perspectives that broaden their understanding of the world.

Military communities may also provide a strong sense of shared purpose. Families understand the demands of service, and neighbors often face similar challenges involving deployments, relocations, and separations. These common experiences can encourage mutual assistance and lasting connections.

Military children may also develop an appreciation for public service, responsibility, and cooperation. Some eventually choose military careers themselves, although familiarity with military life certainly does not guarantee that choice.

These advantages should be understood as opportunities rather than automatic outcomes. Not every military child becomes exceptionally adaptable, independent, or resilient. Much depends on individual temperament, family circumstances, and the quality of support available.

What Parents Can Do to Help

Parents cannot eliminate the disruptions associated with military service, but they can help children navigate them successfully.

Prepare children for moves rather than simply announcing them. Explain where the family is going, what the new location may offer, and what changes to expect. Whenever practical, involve children in decisions about their rooms, activities, and preparations.

Encourage lasting friendships. Help children maintain contact with friends after relocation. Friendships need not end simply because families no longer live in the same community.

Maintain family traditions. Familiar celebrations, routines, and activities provide continuity when nearly everything outside the home changes. A sense of family identity can be especially valuable during frequent relocations.

Listen to children's concerns. A child who appears adaptable may still be disappointed about leaving friends or anxious about entering another school. Acknowledge those feelings rather than insisting that every move is an exciting adventure.

Support involvement in the new community. Sports, scouting, music, clubs, and other organized activities provide opportunities to develop friendships and a sense of belonging. Parents should encourage participation without expecting immediate adjustment.

Recognize the effects of deployment. Relocation is only one aspect of military childhood. Extended parental absences can create uncertainty and emotional strain. Age-appropriate explanations, dependable communication when possible, and support from the parent or caregiver at home can help children cope.

Seek assistance when difficulties persist. Prolonged withdrawal, significant changes in behavior, academic decline, or persistent anxiety and sadness deserve attention. School counselors, military family support programs, and qualified mental health professionals can provide assistance when ordinary family reassurance is insufficient.

Above all, parents should remember that children differ. Siblings raised in the same household may respond quite differently to the same relocation, deployment, or separation. What one regards as an adventure, another may experience as a painful disruption.

A Military Childhood Is Not a Diagnosis

It would be a mistake to portray military childhood as either a guaranteed path to resilience or a source of inevitable psychological harm. The research supports neither conclusion.

Growing up in a military family can involve sacrifices, uncertainty, and interrupted relationships. It can also provide opportunities for travel, cultural experiences, independence, and personal growth. The consequences depend on far more than the number of times a family changes duty stations.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that **children need emotional security even when their geographical surroundings are constantly changing.** Parents cannot always control where the military sends them, how long they will remain, or when the next deployment will occur. They can, however, provide dependable relationships, familiar traditions, understanding, and reassurance.

Military children may grow up without a permanent hometown, but that does not mean they must grow up without a sense of home.

And when those children become adults, the experiences of military childhood become part of their personal history—not a predetermined blueprint for their future.

Sources and Further Reading

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