

CFLE Network Article: Equipping Helping Professionals with Evidence-Based Solutions: Connecting Family Science and Practice to Serve Military Families

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RESEARCH UPDATE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Equipping Helping Professionals With Evidence-Based Solutions: Connecting Family Science and Practice to Serve Military Families

by Mallory Lucier-Greer, Ph.D., CFLE, and Catherine W. O’Neal, Ph.D.

Recently, with our colleague Jay Mancini, we had the opportunity to write about best practices in family life education (FLE) with a focus on military families as part of the *Family Relations* FLE decade review (see “Toward a Framework for Military Family Life Education: Culture, Context, Content, and Practice” by Mancini et al., 2020). The focus of our collective research is examining military family well-being within the context of human development, transitions, and communities, but this paper gave us the opportunity to step back and survey the extent to which military family science research is being *translated* into practical applications for helping professionals who serve military families on the front lines. Two of the big takeaways were the following:



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1. A communication gap continues to exist between researchers and helping professionals.
2. Nevertheless, the research on military families is continuously developing and points toward important implications for helping professionals to develop, implement, and evaluate military FLE.

The Research–Practice Gap

To improve the well-being of military families, it is essential that helping professionals have access to the ever-growing body of military family research. This access encourages the use of evidence-based practices, and, ideally, this access includes researchers being actively involved in the community of practice, or at least offering tangible and practice-oriented implications from their research, as discussed by Patterson et al. in “Evidence-Based Practice for Marriage and Family Therapists,” published in the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* (2004), and Stricker and Keisner in their book *From Research to Clinical Practice* (1985). This is not a new conversation, and neither is it specific to military FLE. More than 70 years ago, conversations about the need to bridge the gap between scientists and practitioners were published in the landmark book *Training in Clinical Psychology* by Raimy (1950) and can be identified in each decade since then, as in “Foundations and Assumptions of the Scientist–Practitioner Model,” an article by Jones and Mehr (2007), and by Stricker and Keisner in their book (cited above).

This communication gap between researchers and practitioners identified in the literature aligns with our own conversations with staff on military installations who specialize in a wide range of family services, including new parent support, family advocacy, deployment/mobilization readiness, financial readiness, victim advocacy, and so on. These helping professionals desire to use research to inform their work, but there are barriers that preclude or limit the use of research, including limited time to find and consume it and the expense associated with accessing it. Furthermore, even when they find and have access to research, most research is written with an academic audience in mind (e.g., emphasis on statistical methods) with limited discussion of policy and clinical implications.

As it relates to military family readiness, several efforts have been made to fill this gap. Perhaps most notably is the U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of Agriculture's (DoD/USDA) Partnership for Military Families. This partnership has supported and continues to support research and outreach to enhance the well-being and psychological health of military families by directly providing services to military families and enhancing the resources of helping professionals and policy makers who serve military families. Here we highlight three of those partnership projects that equip helping professionals with needed tools to serve military families.

- **Military REACH** (<http://www.MilitaryREACH.org>): The mission of REACH is to make military family research practical and accessible. This team, which we lead, identifies military family research as it is published and translates it into brief summaries that spell out key findings and implications. These summaries are freely available in the REACH online library (home to more than 2,500 holdings) and are distributed via social media and monthly newsletters, allowing professionals to stay up-to-date on military family research in a brief, consumable way.
- **Military Families Learning Network** (MFLN; militaryfamilieslearningnetwork.org): MFLN provides free, online professional development opportunities for helping professionals, including but not limited to military family providers and Cooperative Extension professionals. New and archived webinars and continuing education credits are available on a range of family topics, such as nutrition and wellness, community building, family development, transitions, caregiving, literacy, and personal finance.
- **Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness** (militaryfamilies.psu.edu): The Clearinghouse helps professionals to identify, implement, evaluate, and improve programs that strengthen military service members, veterans, and their families. Of particular interest, their website includes a searchable database of more than 1,300 evidence-based family programs where users can quickly identify the components and effectiveness of these programs, thereby assisting in FLE program selection.

Military Family Research and Implications for FLE

The body of military family research is growing almost daily. Over the past 3 years, the Military REACH team has identified an average of 344 new publications per year (e.g., peer-reviewed research, book chapters) related to military family well-being.

Together, this research indicates that military families face both *normative* (e.g., marriage, parenting) and *situational* stressors (e.g., deployment, regular transitions), and most military families demonstrate resilience amid these challenges as described, for example, by Card and colleagues in "A Meta-Analytic Review of Internalizing, Externalizing, and Academic Adjustment Among Children of Deployed Military Service Members," published in *Journal of Family Psychology* (2011); Lucier-Greer et al. in "Adolescent Mental Health and Academic Functioning: Empirical Support for Contrasting Models of Risk and Vulnerability," published in *Military Medicine* (2014); and O'Neal et al. in "Family Relational Health, Psychological Resources, and Health Behaviors: A Dyadic Study of Military Couples" published in *Military Medicine* (2016). However, for some individuals and families, military-related stressors are associated with adverse individual and relational outcomes, meriting intervention for the family system as discussed by Knobloch et al. in "Mental Health Symptoms and the Reintegration Difficulty of Military Couples Following Deployment: A Longitudinal Application of the Relational Turbulence Model," published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2019); and by Lester et al. in "The Long War and Parental Combat Deployment: Effects on Military Children and At-Home Spouses," published in *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2010).

Drawing from this body of research for our FLE decade review paper, we generated a few takeaways for

helping professionals and implications for FLE with military families in our *Family Relations* article (cited earlier; pp. 654, 658). These takeaways and implications include the following:

- FLE must *account for variability across military families*, which may be related to service branch, rank, job assignment, or international conflicts.
- Given the value placed on cohesion and comradery by military members and family members, FLE should *align with opportunities for community connections* and foster skills important for making and sustaining connections.
- Because most military families fare well in the face of adversity, FLE should be *geared to enhancing resilience-related skills*, rather than being solely problem-centered.
- Although military families experience similar stressors over time, such as deployment and relocation, their developmental stage as a family continually changes, as does their surrounding context. Consequently, FLE should *account for how families change even when events and situations appear the same*.
- FLE has a core focus on capacity-building during times of adversity. Accordingly, FLE can *help families understand and process experiences including loss*, especially those associated with the numerous transitions military families experience.
- Military families encounter challenges unique to military life, but they also experience the usual family challenges, such as effective parenting and family communication. FLE *must not focus on particular military challenges at the expense of core family issues*.
- FLE programs have generally not been systematically evaluated, and even less attention has been given to military FLE. Moving forward, *a greater premium should be placed on discerning programs and program components that work* from those that do not while attending to contextual differences in effectiveness.
- Although we recognize that adults/parents are a gateway into the larger family group (i.e., children and extended family), more FLE *programming is needed that is designed for families rather than only adults/parents*.
- Families face multiple barriers to reaching their goals, and challenges with connecting military families to FLE further complicates that process. *Constraints that work against engaging couples and families in military FLE need to be reduced*.
- Existing research and practice literature focused on military members and families provides a wealth of material for family life educators [to consider] as they either develop or adapt programs and implement those programs in military contexts.

These takeaways and recommendations provide a foundation for helping professionals, within both the military and civilian systems, to serve military families using evidence-based practices. We also recognize that these recommendations provide only an initial framework for developing and implementing FLE, and the key to future success will be rooted in *continual* conversations between family scientists and practitioners that fill, or at least reduce, the scientist–practitioner gap while spurring research development and translation.

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