

Research Briefing Paper

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The impact of parental deployment on the wellbeing of British Army children in the pre-school year

What is the issue?

Until this point, the deployment-related wellbeing of British Army children in the pre-school year (aged 3 – 4 years) has been overlooked in research. This is despite increasing national and international recognition that parental deployment can have a profound impact on young service children alongside a worldwide recognition of the importance of early childhood experiences to later development. This absence of such research has been problematic, particularly in terms of accurately informing educational, social and Armed Forces policy and practice for this specific age group of children.

‘Wellbeing’ is also increasingly used to refer to the deployment related experiences of service children of all ages across the different branches of the Armed Forces both in the UK and international context, yet there are multiple interpretations of this conceptually vague term. This, in turn, influences how it is both understood and operationalised. My research has explored the concept of wellbeing in more detail in order to develop a model that may be used to inform policy, practice and future research with children experiencing a parental deployment. Importantly, this model recognises that service children do not exist in a vacuum; they are individuals who are part of families, homes, social relationships, educational settings and their wider communities.

About the research

A case study design focusing on ten children experiencing a parental deployment was employed within an Army Garrison in England. In each case, the deployed parent was the father. Interviews were conducted with the ten non-deployed/at-home mothers and fourteen pre-school practitioners working with the children. Six of the pre-school children (aged 3 – 4 years) took part in the study via participatory research methods. The fathers were not interviewed as they were deployed at the time.

Key findings

The deployment-related wellbeing of pre-school children occurs within, and is shaped by, their social relationships and cultural environments.

- The local Army environment and cultural context had created a unique community that was bound by the common thread of military service and the shared experiences of Army life.

- The length and types of deployments influenced the Army-focused support that families felt they received or were entitled to receive during this time.
- The father's deployments were found to have an impact on the psychological, physical, social and cognitive wellbeing of a pre-school child and on other members of the at-home family.
 - The impact of deployment on children's wellbeing was directly influenced by being separated from a primary caregiver, and indirectly influenced through the impact that this has on the at-home parent/caregiver and siblings. The lengths and types of the deployments further influenced the impact of such separation.
- The wellbeing of the pre-school child during a parental deployment is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of the at-home parent (in each case in my research, this was the mother).
 - The attachment relationships between the pre-school children and their mothers were found to be dyadic in nature, the wellbeing of each individual impacting on the wellbeing of the other. Importantly, this relationship was found to offer both aspects of resilience and risk which was particularly - but not entirely - mediated via the psychological wellbeing of the at-home mothers during the deployments.
- The pre-school environments were found to support the children's psychological, physical, social and cognitive domains of wellbeing by facilitating other key social relationships (such as with friends and keyworkers) and by providing stability and routine during a time of change at home.

Different aspects or 'domains' of pre-school children's wellbeing are impacted by a parental deployment.

- Parental deployment was found to impact to varying degrees upon children's psychological, physical, social and cognitive domains of wellbeing, with psychological wellbeing emerging as the largest domain.
 - Psychological wellbeing refers to indicators of emotion and/or mental health. Physical wellbeing refers to indicators of bodily health. Social wellbeing refers to indicators of a child's relationships with others, particularly those outside of their immediate family. Cognitive wellbeing refers to intellectual, educational or school-related indicators. All four domains were found to be interlinked and influential on each other, illustrating the holistic nature of wellbeing.

Drawing on different conceptual approaches to wellbeing leads to a more holistic understanding of this term.

- Wellbeing can be conceptualised in different ways and this often depends on the reasons that an individual or organisation has for exploring it in the first instance.
- Exploring wellbeing through a variety of lenses was found to offer differing and insightful perspectives through which to better understand this conceptually vague term. The philosophical, psychological, medical/health and economic approaches were considered within this research.

Drawing upon the perspectives of parents, educational practitioners and the children themselves leads to a more accurate representation of their deployment-related wellbeing.

'I was scared....I thought my Mum had runned away'
Toby, aged 4

- Practitioner and child perspectives are often overlooked within research on this age group of service children. Young service children's voices remain underrepresented in research worldwide. Exploring a variety of perspectives was found to offer a more holistic view of the pre-school children's deployment-related wellbeing.

The findings from this research are represented in the following model:

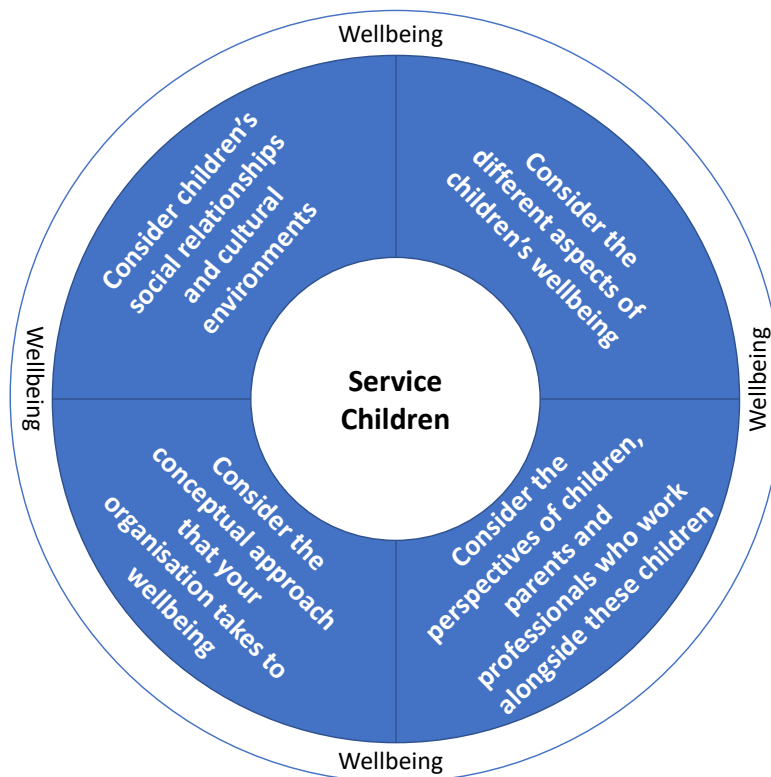


Fig. 1 – Exploring and understanding service children's deployment-related wellbeing: A model of four factors to consider

- This model could be applied to policy, practice and research with service children from the different branches of the Armed Forces (Navy, Army, Air Force) in both the UK and international context. It could also be applied to different age groups of service children.

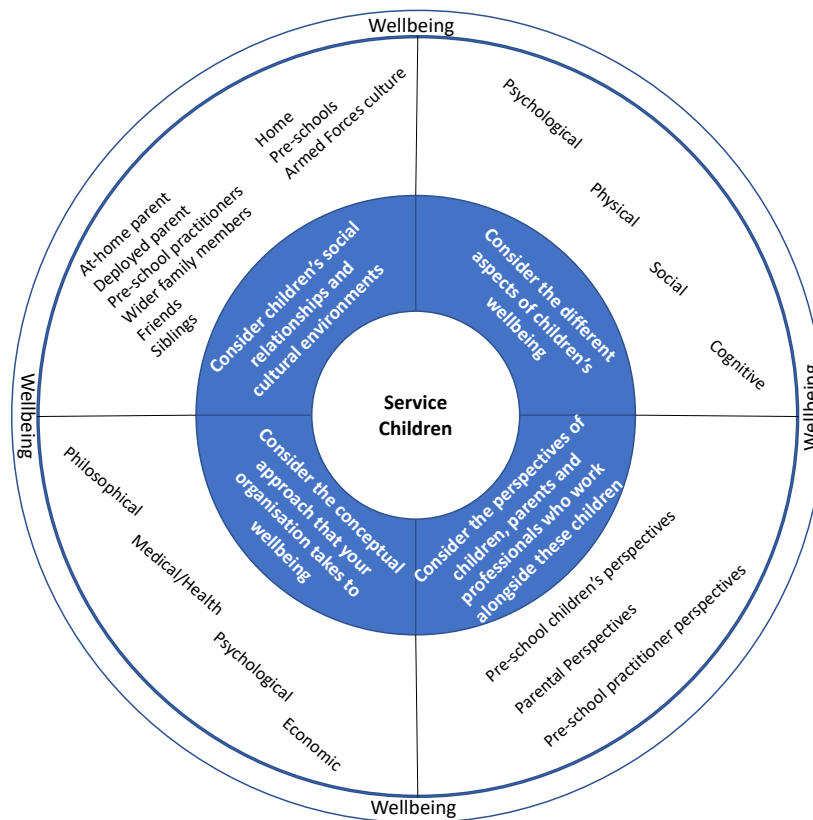


Fig.2 - The model as applied in my research

Recommendations arising from the research

The Department for Education and Ministry of Defence should consider:

- Tailoring support to meet the needs of children's psychological, physical, social and cognitive wellbeing during a parental deployment.
- Focusing support on the at-home family unit during a period of deployment.
- Extending the Service Pupil Premium in England into the pre-school year in order to facilitate the previous two points.
- Creating or extending current information to include details of the factors that can impact upon the different domains of pre-school children's wellbeing during a parental deployment, and how parents and practitioners can support this.

- Ensuring that early years provision which is sensitive to the needs of this group of children is readily available to families during a period of parental deployment.
- Actively encouraging increased levels of communication between early years providers and military bases/units in order to better support such children and their families.
- Providing more detailed guidance on the impact of deployment on young children's wellbeing to early years providers across the nation.

Researchers of service children's wellbeing should consider:

- Representing the views of the children themselves alongside those of their parents and practitioners who work with them.
- Exploring the social relationships and cultural environments that the children are part of, including an acknowledgment of how the differences between and within the branches of the Armed Forces can lead to different deployment demands on families.
- Continuing to move away from measures that look solely at problematic behaviours and/or attainment and academic performance in service children during times of parental deployment.

Organisations who support the welfare of military families should consider:

- Continuing to work alongside researchers and the Ministry of Defence to identify areas of need surrounding the wellbeing of service children.
- Continuing to work alongside researchers and the Ministry of Defence to disseminate the findings of research such as this to service families and signposting them to appropriate support during times of deployment.

Early years providers should consider:

- Ensuring that provision is available and, where possible, prioritised to children currently experiencing a parental deployment.
- Working alongside parents to develop an array of strategies to help young children understand concepts such as time, distance and parental roles in relation to parental deployments.

These findings arise from my PhD research at Bath Spa University and are subject to the CC BY-ND licence agreement. I welcome the opportunity to discuss my findings in more detail. For more enquiries on my research, please contact g.normile@bathspa.ac.uk