

Service Children's Progression



WEEKENDING

NON-OPERATIONAL FAMILY SEPARATION

IN THIS BRIEFING:

This briefing addresses the effect of non-operational family separations on Royal Navy and Royal Marines families. It highlights a range of issues that may help practitioners better understand the family contexts and experiences of children of Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel.

Military families can experience a variety of different separations due to the occupational demands of Service life. This includes separations due to operations but also those due to training or particular requirement of military roles (non-operational separations). In the UK, these shorter, frequent forms of separation are common among Naval Service families. Referred to as 'weekending', around a third of Royal Navy and Royal Marine personnel live away from the family home during the week, with their families living in local civilian communities rather than on a military base. While previous research has shown how deployment can influence the health, wellbeing and functioning of military families, much less is known about the impacts of other forms of military family separation.

To understand the influence of non-operational family separations upon family functioning and

well-being among Royal Navy/Royal Marines (RN/RM) families, the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR), King's College London, led a research project commissioned by the Naval Families Federation, with funding from Greenwich Hospital. This study combined data from pre-existing studies of Naval Service personnel, spouses/partners and children from within KCMHR, as well as new studies including an online survey and interviews with spouses and focus groups with young people from Naval families. This briefing reports on findings from the new studies only.

The full report, *The effect of non-operational family separations on family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy/Royal Marines families*, is available via the Naval Families Federation (<https://nff.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Non-Operational-Separations.pdf>)

Approximately 36% of Naval Service families live separately from personnel during the working week compared to 24% of all UK Armed Forces families.

Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitudes Survey, Ministry of Defence (2016)

Service Children's Progression



Four themes were identified from the findings of the survey, interviews with spouses and focus groups with young people.

Spousal employment

Two thirds of spouses/partners felt non-operational separations had negative impacts on their employment, especially if they had children under 5 years old. In interviews, spouses/partners described in interviews the challenges of balancing employment alongside the entirety of family responsibilities when personnel were away. Spouses described only being able to choose work which coordinated with affordable childcare or school hours. As a result of these conflicts between work and family, some spouses reported leaving their jobs, courses or training for more flexible alternatives and making substantial compromises to their careers to manage their partner's frequent absence.

Family life & functioning

Most spouses/partners reported negative impacts of non-operational separations upon family life. In interviews, spouses described the challenges of not being able to share their daily lives with personnel and having restricted time as a family. Spouses highlighted the double burden of managing all family responsibilities during the week, which could leave them feeling like a single parent during the week. These challenges were compounded if personnel had to travel long distances to get home as well as by disruptions caused by unforeseen changes to Naval Service programming, duties or watch-bills.

Weekending was reported as having both positive and negative effects on relationships between personnel and their spouses. Seven out of ten spouses felt well-supported by their partners but eight out of ten reported difficulties

communicating with them while they were away. Some spouses explained feeling frustration and resentment towards their partner as a result of being a 'single' parent during the week. This was described as leading to difficulties with emotional and physical intimacy and concerns about relationship breakdown and infidelity.

Two thirds of spouses reported that their children had insufficient contact with their serving parent during the week. Spouses described how older siblings often took on more responsibilities in the family home during separations, partially fulfilling the role of the absent parent. This could sometimes lead to feelings of resentment and unsettled relationships between children and personnel. Some younger children experienced adjustment problems when their parent returned for the weekend. Young people themselves tended to express more positive experiences of non-operational separation than spouses and were appreciative of the time they were able to have with their father when he was home.

Family health & well-being

The survey indicated that 60% of spouses reported a negative impact on their mental health as a result of separations and 50% experienced a negative impact on their physical health. In interview, many spouses described 'just' about coping with the burden of responsibilities in the week, leading to stress, anxiety, or tiredness. This could lead to the emergence of new mental health issues. Spouses with pre-existing mental health difficulties explained how separation exacerbated these problems and that they intended to remain on long-term medication until their serving partners left Service and returned home. Difficulties in accessing childcare were reported to lead to spouses forfeiting exercise and healthy eating, affecting both mental and physical well-

Service Children's Progression



being.

Some children were described as coping well with separations and this sometimes led to positive experiences, such as increased support and closeness among siblings. Children with more experiences of military family separations were reported to be more understanding of their parent's absence. Separations were reported as more disruptive for toddlers and younger children, who were reported as exhibiting more regressive and externalising behaviours. Some spouses described mental health problems among children, including exacerbation of severe separation anxiety and stress among older children taking on additional family responsibilities. No problems were reported at school or with education generally. Although only mentioned by a few participants, Naval personnel were also reportedly affected by separation. Missing key family moments and the perception of a lessened role in the family could lead to personnel feeling upset or uncertain about their role in the household.

Family resources

Civilian employer support, social support, childcare and schools and financial stability were all reported to help mitigate some of the challenges caused by non-deployment separation. However, these were not available to all families, leading to more stressful separations. Civilian employers were reported to help spouses manage separation by allowing flexible working and time off when children were ill. Such stability was supportive but sometimes disincentivised spouses from taking on new career opportunities elsewhere that may not be as understanding. Spouses explained how schools could alleviate work-family conflict by providing cost-effective childcare support for parents as well as emotional

support for children. Childcare outside of these hours was restricted by expense, availability and having children of varying ages and resulted in some spouses giving up employment or further education where childcare wasn't easily available.

Support from friends and family was crucial for managing daily challenges. In some cases, this led to the benefits of closer intergenerational relationships between children and their grandparents. Those living on or near military patches were able to access a social network, a sense of community and shared understanding during non-operational separations. This was explained as helping curb feelings of isolation and providing options for informal reciprocal childcare. Social networks were, however, difficult for spouses to maintain due to increased family responsibilities and childcare precluding social opportunities. Online interactions and social media provided helpful information and support for those who were geographically dispersed but could be difficult to navigate.

Support from the Naval Service was described as variable in availability and quality. Uncertainty about who to contact within the welfare services or what support they were eligible for was commonly expressed among participants. Some spouses felt capable of managing without support and others perceived that their serving partners would not want them to contact these services. Additionally, accessing services on-base was hard for those who lived in local civilian communities. Financial allowances provided by the Navy and Marine Services were not considered sufficient by some families and could prevent personnel returning home for the weekend, contributing to longer periods of separation and increasing the pressures of parental absence.

Service Children's Progression



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Families themselves recommended having a strong network of military and non-military family and friends for support, keeping a positive state of mind and not overthinking their circumstances, but 'rolling with it'.
- Military charities should provide information on common experiences and reactions to weekending and simple methods for overcoming problems, including financial tips and ideas for activities. Online platforms should be developed to supplement the lack of physical communities amongst Naval families and increase informal support.
- The Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (RNRMW) can increase the provision of information directly to families rather than relying on personnel as a conduit of information. Outreach can be improved for geographically dispersed families and signposting should be improved for the nearest welfare services and community events rather than those at their home base.
- The Naval Command and the Ministry of Defence should seek, where possible, consistency around programming, duties and watch-bills and to improve the identification of 'weekending' families and allow welfare services to better support families during separations.
- Further quantitative and qualitative research is required to better understand family functioning and wellbeing in 'weekending' families and their needs.
- Information should be disseminated to medical professionals and services working with these families to improve understanding of the particular stressors of 'weekending'.
- Further recommendations can be found in: *The effect of non-operational family separations on family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy/Royal Marines families.*

AUTHORS: DR RACHAEL GRIBBLE, PROFESSOR NICOLA T FEAR

Rachael Gribble is Lecturer in War and Psychiatry at King's College London. She is a member of the King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London (KCMHR). Nicola Fear is Professor of Epidemiology at King's College London and Director of KCMHR.

THE SCIP ALLIANCE

The Service Children's Progression Alliance leads UK and international work to improve the educational progression of the children of armed forces personnel and veterans. We undertake research, champion better policy and support effective practice to enable thriving lives for Service children.

THE SCIP ALLIANCE IS LED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER, SUPPORTED BY THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE.



HAVE YOU FOUND THIS BRIEFING USEFUL? LET US KNOW HOW.
COULD YOU HELP CREATE A BRIEFING? PLEASE GET IN TOUCH.

Service Children's Progression



REFERENCES

Gribble, N. and Fear, N. (2019). *The effect of non-operational family separations on family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy/Royal Marines families*. <https://nff.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Non-Operational-Separations.pdf>

Ministry of Defence (2016). *Tri-service families continuous attitude survey 2016*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/540808/Tri-Service_Families_Continuous_Attitude_Survey_2016_Main_Report.pdf