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Service children's wellbeing in the context of three- to four-year-old Army children experiencing a parental deployment

Dr Georgina Normile, Bath Spa University

Abstract

Where 'wellbeing' is referred to in relation to children from Armed Forces (service) backgrounds, it is often done so in absence of an exploration of this conceptually vague term. This is problematic, as there are multiple interpretations and discourses of wellbeing which, in turn, influence how it is both understood and operationalised by practitioners and policy-makers worldwide. This article examines the deployment-related wellbeing of an under researched group; pre-school children (aged three to four years) from British Army families. Framed within a cultural historical approach, this study employed interviews (n=30) with ten non-deployed/at home mothers and fourteen pre-school practitioners. Six of the pre-school children also took part in the interviews. Findings highlight that young children's relationships and socio-cultural environments influence the impact of a parental deployment on different domains of their wellbeing. Drawing upon multiple discourses of wellbeing further affords the reframing of young children's deployment-related wellbeing away from the traditional deficit approach of observable problematised behaviours towards a more positive approach, considering the reasons behind such behaviours. Findings led to the creation of a model to aid practitioners and policy-makers seeking to understand and support young Army children's wellbeing.

Keywords: Service children, military children, pre-school children

Introduction

Service children of all ages from the United Kingdom and around the world are routinely separated from one or both parents in the event of military-related deployments. The nature of the Armed Forces in both the British and international context means that deployment frequently lacks choice in terms of destination and length of deployment, can

occur repeatedly, be short notice and can carry a risk to the life of that individual. The impact of deployment-related parental separations on school-aged children has become increasingly well-established within service children's research both in the UK and international context (Hawkshaw and Markson, 2019; Longfield, 2018), yet much less focus has been given to the deployment-related experiences of service children in early childhood before they start school (Cunitz et al, 2019; Nolan and Misca, 2018). In the UK context, Nolan and Misca (2018: 14) note "there is a yawning hole in the British literature that urgently needs to be filled to ensure the wellbeing of young children in British military families in relation to the deployment cycle". This article seeks to address this gap by presenting an empirical study involving interviews with non-deployed mothers, pre-school children and pre-school practitioners. The data reported below are part of a larger study which explored the impact of Army deployments on young children's wellbeing within an Army base in England, guided by the following research question: How do social relationships and cultural environments impact upon different domains of pre-school children's wellbeing during a parental deployment?

Conceptualising service children's wellbeing

Whilst wellbeing is increasingly referred to in relation to the deployment-related experiences of service children of all ages in both UK and international literature (Mustillo et al. 2016; Nolan and Misca, 2018; Public Health England, 2015; Walker et al. 2020), it is often referred to with little or no accompanying exploration of the nuances of this conceptually vague term. This can lead to a presumption that stakeholders such as practitioners, parents and policy-makers hold the same views about what wellbeing actually is. Within the wider field of wellbeing this is acknowledged to be problematic, particularly as perspectives and foci arising from different disciplines influence the way in which wellbeing is conceptualised and operationalised by individuals and organisations (Axford, 2009; Ereaut and Whiting, 2008; LaPlaca et al., 2013) leading to "implicit understandings within policy arenas" (Street, 2020: 211).

Problems in conceptualising wellbeing may arise from it having foundations in multiple disciplines such as medicine/health, psychology, philosophy and economics (Lewis, 2019).

Interpretations are shaped by the positions from which individuals and organisations approach this concept and their motivations for doing so. For example, a large-scale report on the needs of UK Armed Forces families (Walker et al. 2020) adopts a medical/health lens, discussing wellbeing predominantly in terms of mental health and access to appropriate provision. In contrast, a report by the Children’s Commissioner for England (Longfield, 2018) adopts a more psychological approach, focusing on the lived experiences of service children aged between 8 – 15 years.

In wider research on wellbeing, it is recognised that there is a tendency to overuse the term in relation to emotional aspects of people’s lives (Clack, 2012; Roberts, 2010), often using it interchangeably with concepts such as *happiness*, *flourishing*, *quality of life* and *life satisfaction* (Deci and Ryan, 2008; Statham and Chase, 2010). The eudaimonic tradition of philosophy challenges the assumption that wellbeing and happiness are two sides of the same coin, asserting that if the meaning of life and wellbeing is dependent on how we are feeling at any one moment, then we are left vulnerable to the impact of life’s inevitable adversities (Clack, 2012). Instead, this approach recognises that a fulfilling life requires both the “cultivation of an appropriate disposition *and* a supportive external context in which such an outlook might flourish” (Clack, 2012: 501, original emphasis). This implies that young children’s wellbeing during a parental deployment should not just be seen as a reaction but should also be considered in terms of the individual, social and cultural resources that influence such reactions.

Examining the multiple domains of wellbeing affords one way to address the tendency for it to be referred to as relating to just emotional aspects of children’s lives, allowing other domains to be foregrounded. A variety of perspectives have emerged regarding the different domains of children’s wellbeing; Roberts (2010) points out that over a half of a century’s literature on early childhood development can broadly be categorised into four domains of physical, emotional, social and cognitive wellbeing. Similarly, Pollard and Lee (2003) identify five domains of wellbeing: physical, psychological, social, cognitive and economic. Interestingly, they note that the physical, social, cognitive and economic domains tend to measure positive indicators of wellbeing while the psychological domain was characterised by deficit indicators.

A deficit focus surrounding the psychological or emotional elements of wellbeing is evident within existing international literature on the deployment experiences of young service children, which often frames young children's wellbeing in terms of *problem behaviours* they may display during the absence of the serving parent/s. Barker and Berry (2009) reported that children aged birth to four years showed an increased need for more attention, increased clinginess, increased temper tantrums, defiance and sleep problems during a parental deployment. Chartrand et al. (2008) similarly found that children between the ages of three and five with a deployed parent had increased internalised behavioural symptoms (emotional reactivity, anxiousness/depression, somatic complaints or withdrawal) and increased externalised behavioural symptoms (attention difficulties and aggression) compared to same-aged children without a deployed parent. More recently, Mustillo et al. (2016) found that experiencing a recent long deployment (over 30 days in the past three months) was associated with higher levels of generalised anxiety in children aged three to five years, whilst Cunitz et al. (2019) used measurements of anxiety/depression, hyperactivity/inattention and aggressive behaviour to represent children's deployment experiences. Whilst insightful, deficit measures are not the only way of encapsulating the experiences of young children during a parental deployment as they overlook the factors within their lives that can lead to resilience. Furthermore, such approaches often fail to represent the children's subjective experiences of their own wellbeing.

Young children's subjective voices on their own deployment-related experiences are underrepresented and research remains characterised by a reliance on parental report on measures such as behavioural problems. Such approaches potentially tell us more about parental experiences of deployment than those of the child (Trautmann et al. 2015). Accurately representing the wellbeing of young children ethically and authentically is difficult (Colliver, 2017), but wellbeing is also a subjective experience therefore it is important that we represent the subjective wellbeing of young children (Mashford-Scott et al. 2012). The perspectives of early years professionals are also frequently overlooked in research with service children (Stites, 2016), thereby missing the opportunity to explore children's wellbeing within one of their key social and cultural environments. From a cultural historical perspective, Hedegaard and Fleer (2008) note that to understand children

we must be cognisant of the wider social, cultural and historical practices in which they live and learn. In terms of young service children, this includes their homes, educational settings and the social relationships and communities that they are part of.

Method

Six early years settings near a large Army base in England took part in the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with at-home parents of pre-school children (spouse/partner of the deployed parent, n = 10) who currently had a parent deployed and the pre-school practitioners currently working with those children (keypersons and pre-school managers, n = 14). Whilst the research did not aim to be gender-specific in terms of the non-serving/at-home parents, in the final sample all the non-serving at-home parents were the mothers. This reflects the wider gender breakdown of the British Regular Armed Forces, with recent statistics showing that only 11.5% is female (Ministry of Defence, 2023). The fathers were not interviewed as they were deployed at the time.

In line with Article 12 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child: allowing children to express their views freely in matters that affect them (United Nations, 1989), the pre-school children were invited to take part in the research alongside either their mothers or keyperson. This was firstly discussed with the mothers and the pre-school settings and consent was given for six of the ten children to take part. Age-appropriate language was used to discuss the purpose of the study and ascertain the assent of the six children, which was given (girls n = 2; boys n = 4; three years n = 1; four years n = 5). Wording was carefully selected to promote the free and informed choices of the children. Had they indicated either verbally or non-verbally that they did not want to take part then the research would not have proceeded, regardless of the parent having given consent. At the same time as being afforded the right to represent their own subjective experiences, children must be afforded the right not to speak, not to inform and not to express themselves (Eide and Winger, 2005). All names were changed to preserve anonymity.

Child's Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Location and length of father's deployment	Child participated in study?
Alfie	4 years 5 months	Estonia 9 months	Yes
Charlotte	4 years 10 months	Estonia 9.5 months	Yes
Daisy	3 years 11 months	Estonia 6 months	Yes
Isla	3 years 9 months	Canada 3 months	No
Jessica	3 years 10 months	Canada 3 months	No
Joshua	4 years 3 months	Estonia 9 months	Yes
Lucy	4 years 2 months	Afghanistan 6 months	No
Owen	3 years 11 months	Estonia 5.5 months	No
Toby	4 years 6 months	Estonia 5.5 months	Yes
Tom	4 years 4 months	Canada 3 months	Yes

Table 1 – Details of the ten focus children

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. Following a review of existing literature surrounding domains of wellbeing (Pollard and Lee, 2003; Roberts, 2010) indicators of emotion and/or mental health were coded as *psychological wellbeing*. Indicators related to bodily health were coded as *physical wellbeing*. Indicators of a child's relationships with others - particularly those outside of

their immediate family - were coded as *social wellbeing*. Indicators of development or attainment were coded as *cognitive wellbeing*. Following the initial analysis of wellbeing domains, coding then focused on the domains of wellbeing within the contexts of the children's social relationships and cultural environments.

Discussion of findings

Findings highlight how different domains of pre-school children's wellbeing were impacted by parental deployment and how their social relationships and cultural environments influenced this.

Domains of wellbeing

The most prevalent domain to emerge from the data was psychological wellbeing, followed by physical, social and cognitive wellbeing respectively.

The primary way that the impact of the fathers' deployment presented within the pre-school children's psychological wellbeing was enhanced clinginess and anxiety at being separated from the at-home mother. For example, Owen's mother reported *'he would just say 'I want to stay with you, I want to be with you' and that was the only way it manifested'*. Toby's mother similarly described how Toby suddenly displayed anxiety at being separated from her during his father's absence, *'...the only thing that changed was like being away from me, but that's been massive'*. Discussions with Toby indicated that this was due to a fear that his mother might leave as well:

Researcher - *Do you remember why you wanted to get into the bathroom?*

Toby - *For a Mummy cuddle!*

Researcher - *You wanted Mummy cuddles! Why did you want Mummy cuddles?*

Toby - *I was scared.*

Researcher - *You were scared. What made you scared?*

Toby - *I thought my Mum had runned away.*

Two mothers also described how their children's increased anxiety at being separated from them was accompanied by an increase in their children's concern for the mothers' safety during the period of their fathers' absence. Owen's mother reported how Owen was concerned for her whilst spending a weekend away from her at his grandparent's house:

He had to ring up to me every hour or two in the day to speak to me and to make sure that I was ok... and he'd ring up and say 'when you come and collect me drive carefully, come fast but don't come too fast' like he'd got really protective.

Whilst the sudden absence of a parent was found to cause emotional distress and sadness, it does not necessarily mean that this would lead to poor psychological wellbeing or that behaviours of increased clinginess should be classified as problematic. The philosophical discourse of wellbeing offers a useful perspective, highlighting how the emotion of happiness cannot realistically be maintained at all times and feeling sad in response to losses within one's life is an entirely appropriate emotion. Ancient philosophical approaches acknowledge the importance of cultivating mental resources that enable individuals to cope with all of life's eventualities, good and bad (Clack, 2012). Feeling sad at the sudden absence of a father and seeking the support of the mother (or another trusted adult) can therefore be seen as a normal and age-appropriate rather than problematic behaviour. For the pre-school child, knowing that they can access the comfort and support of their mother can help them to adapt to the changes in their home situation. In this sense, healthy attachment relationships between the children and their mothers in this study were found to be a protective factor for positive psychological wellbeing during the fathers' deployments. This can be seen to be an important component of what Roberts (2010) refers to as resilient wellbeing, where normal development occurs under difficult conditions.

Whilst physical wellbeing initially appeared to be understated, seven of the ten mothers emphasised the importance of adapting their routines early in the deployments to ensure that the children still maintained healthy diets, regular bathing and bedtime routines. For

example, Alfie's mother noted '*...with no routine everything just turns to chaos and you end up living off toast*'. This suggests that the mothers were often prioritising their children's physical wellbeing by maintaining healthy eating, sleeping and sporting/leisure/play habits of their families during the deployment; indicators that traditionally fall within the medical/health discourse of wellbeing. Roberts (2010) notes that providing the conditions for good physical wellbeing affords firm foundations for other domains of young children's wellbeing to develop. Supporting the at-home parent in adapting their routines to lone parenting early in the deployment may then have a positive impact on all domains of young children's wellbeing.

Social wellbeing, in the form of established friendships and opportunities to play alongside other children, emerged as a protective factor for resilience during the father's deployments. This is in line with wider findings on the importance of children's friendships to their wellbeing (Brogaard-Clausen and Robson, 2019; Dunn, 2004). As described by Lucy's pre-school manager:

She's got fairly solid friendships, she's at the point of her development where she's formed quite strong partnerships, that's obviously something on a day-to-day she can walk in and know that partnership is there because that partnership is around all the time and that's probably very powerful.

Only one of the ten children demonstrated episodes of poor social wellbeing in the form of throwing toys or being verbally unkind to other children. In this situation, practitioners at his pre-school and his mother linked these behaviours to the impact of his father's regular and repeated deployments to the wellbeing of his entire family unit; a finding echoed in international research with young service children (Lester et al. 2016).

Cognitive wellbeing as a domain emerged less overtly in comparison to other domains of wellbeing. The managers and practitioners at the pre-schools did not highlight issues relating to educational indicators during a parental deployment, such as attainment against the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (EYFS). The manager at Joshua's pre-school did,

however, note that she had seen a slowing down of his educational progress, '*...those first few months there was a definite stop in development, there was a stubbornness where he didn't want to do anything, we weren't getting anything from him...*'. In this study, the children's cognitive wellbeing did not appear to be negatively impacted by the absence of the fathers and this may be due to it being supported by the maintenance and stability of relationships and routines within their families and pre-school settings.

The Influence of Social Relationships

Five relationships were found to be influential to the children's wellbeing; those between the child and the deployed father, the at-home parent, friends, pre-school practitioners and siblings.

From the perspective of all the mothers, practitioners and pre-school children, the father leaving the family home directly caused varying levels of sadness and distress within the children. As well as displaying increased anxiety at being separated from the at-home mothers, the children were found to also be capable of verbalising the sadness they felt in response to the absence of their fathers. For example, Toby remarked '*...I like it when my Daddy and my Mummy's just here and not when my Daddy's not here and my Mummy's not here*'. Conversations with the mothers and pre-school practitioners revealed that children's verbal reflections and interactions occurred regularly throughout the deployments, such as was the case for Tom, '*...he just started crying and I said 'what's up?' and he said 'I miss Daddy'*' (Tom's mother). Verbal expressions of the fathers' absences were also seen within the pre-school environments and arose during everyday activities, such as in Jessica's play, '*...it could be something as simple as when they're playing in the mud kitchen and they go 'oh look, my Dad makes pancakes' and she'll go (upset tone) "my Daddy's not here"*' (Jessica's keyperson).

A relationship found to hold particular influence was between the children and their at-home mothers. All the pre-school practitioners and mothers identified this as a key relationship to influence the children's wellbeing during a deployment. For example, Isla's pre-school manager noted '*she's got a very stable Mum which is massive, it's huge, so Mum*

is such a stable influence and stable force for her'. The dyadic nature of the attachment relationship between the children and at-home mothers was also evident throughout the data; the wellbeing of the mother impacted on the wellbeing of the pre-school child, just as the wellbeing of the pre-school child impacted on the wellbeing of the mother. For example, Toby's mother reported feeling more stressed in part due to Toby's heightened anxiety at being separated from her, whilst simultaneously recognising that her heightened stress levels then had an impact on his psychological wellbeing:

... just like to the point where it's every five minutes, just checking that I'm there. I think the stress of things, I've probably not helped the situation at first where I'm stressed out and I'm like 'this is really hard for Mummy', you know, little things...because when it's just constant.

Discussions alongside Toby highlighted the significance of this relational process further when he recalled a situation where he had been concerned that his mother might leave in reaction to her elevated levels of stress:

Toby - *She has (left) before though, when I was crying*

Toby's Mother - *Where did I go though?*

Toby - *I don't just*

Toby's Mother - *Did I go in the bathroom, where did I go?*

Toby - *In your bedroom and locked the door and said 'I will never come out again' and you goned out the gate without us.*

Continued discussion with Toby's mother gave further insight into the dyadic relational processes at play in this situation:

That was the time when, I mean. (Pauses). It's been hard. They were playing up, Matt wasn't here and I found out I was pregnant and they knew something was going on and it was really difficult and I, yeah, I

did have those moments where it's just - I can't take this, it's really hard.

From the cultural historical perspective, the child is an active agent in the creation of the circumstances that promote their health and wellbeing and contextual factors should not only be envisaged to be having an effect *on* the child (Fleer, 2003; Rogoff, 2003; Rose et al. 2016). Individual differences in personality and temperament mean that some children may be more vulnerable to stress in undesirable conditions than others (Chen and Schmidt, 2015) and the at-home parent may be faced with coping with such challenges during a time in which they themselves are coping with their own stress of their partner being deployed. Interestingly, Toby's keyperson felt that Toby had displayed no adverse effects of his father being deployed whilst in their care, highlighting both the importance of gathering multiple perspectives surrounding a deployment and the stabilising influence that a supportive early years setting may provide. For example, children can access multiple layers of support through their relationships within their early years settings whilst, in turn, at-home parents may be afforded a level of relief and support during a time of enhanced stress within their home environments.

As discussed above, parents, practitioners and the children highlighted the benefits of the children's friendships and social wellbeing during a parental deployment. For Charlotte, the value of a shared deployment experience appeared to have a positive impact on her wellbeing:

(Charlotte passes the researcher a card from her friend Maiya)

Researcher - *So why did she send this card to you Charlotte?*

Charlotte - *She wanted to make my Daddy come back*

Researcher - *Do you know when Daddy's coming back?*

Charlotte - *I sent this for Maiya's Daddy to come back*

Researcher - *I see, where is Maiya's Daddy?*

Charlotte - *Estonia too*

Researcher - Estonia too!

Relationships with pre-school practitioners were also important in supporting the children during a time of uncertainty and loss within a parental deployment. Alfie was described as retreating to his pre-school practitioners for comfort after his father's initial deployment, *'...when Daddy's away, he can go, he can sort of go back on himself and actually become really quiet, he likes to then be with an adult ...'* (Alfie's pre-school manager). Knowing that there were consistent and supportive adults within his pre-school environment appeared to bolster his wellbeing during this time of distress. Drawing on the psychological discourse of wellbeing, Dodge et al.'s (2012) model conceptualises wellbeing as a seesaw with a set point of equilibrium or homeostasis; the fluctuating state of wellbeing being caused by challenges and resources of the individual. Dodge et al. (2012: 230) note "in essence, stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge". Having supportive and close attachment bonds with others can be seen as an important psychological resource in helping the child to return to a state of equilibrium during or following a time of distress. However, not all pre-school Army children experiencing deployment have secure attachment relationships (Riggs and Riggs, 2011), which may then act as an aspect of risk rather than resilience. This is an area that would benefit from further research.

Relationships with siblings emerged to a lesser level than other relationships within the data. Two of the mothers reported that their children (in terms of sibling pairs) responded differently to each other, even though they had been experiencing the same deployment. Daisy's mother felt that the largest impact of the deployment on Daisy was via her relationship with her older brother, *'I think the more it's affected her is because our older one, it's affected him. She's seen him, his behaviour, and then she's been copying'*. The differences across siblings may be a function of personality, age or developmental differences, with existing research highlighting differences across age groups (Chartrand et al. 2008). From the perspective of the psychological discourse, however, wellbeing is subjectively defined and two individuals in the same circumstance may indeed experience different states of wellbeing (Fegter et al. 2010).

The Influence of Cultural Environments

The local Army environment within this study had created a community bound by the common thread of military service and shared experiences of Army life. Many of the mothers and pre-school practitioners used the phrases *Army family/children/wives* when referring to themselves or other Army families in a way that might not be similarly used to describe children and families from other professions, such as a medical, engineering or teaching background. For the ten mothers in this study, this shared sense of identity and belonging within the community provided an important element of psychological support to themselves and their young children during a deployment. Charlotte's mother identified the importance of this to her own psychological wellbeing, '*...I think what has helped me has been other Army wives, especially ones who are going through it or have been through it because you really do have that understanding*'. Reflecting on her wider experiences of working with Army families, however, Tom's pre-school manager identified how this sense of shared identity could equally lead to isolation for some families, '*...because we are service we are all part of that one big family, which yes can work against you because if you don't fit in that family, you're stuffed*'.

The length and types of deployments influenced the Army-focused support that families in the sample felt they received or were entitled to receive during this time. The fathers were deployed in one of three locations: Afghanistan, Estonia and Canada. At the time of data collection, the British Army considered both Afghanistan and Estonia to be *operational* deployments whereby Canada was considered to be a *training* deployment (Ministry of Defence, 2018). The longest deployment was nine and a half months (Estonia) and the shortest was three months (Canada). Deployment lengths to Estonia were considered by all the mothers and pre-school practitioners to be unusually long in the current context of deployment in the British Army but were felt to be well supported. This appeared to be influenced by a social construct based on historical models that had framed certain cultural norms relating to British Army deployments. One mother remarked '*It's hard. Very hard. You can't quite see the light at the end of the tunnel... we're almost, way past half the new year and he's still not back. It's very stressful, this length of deployment*' (Alfie's mother). In

contrast, Isla's mother reflected that her husband's three-month deployment to Canada was *'...not a proper deployment.'* In turn, such perspectives on training deployments appeared to influence the Army-focused support that Tom's mother felt was on offer to her family during this time, *'I don't know if they feel like because it's not like Afghanistan or something like that that you don't really need it like for Canada, like not anywhere dangerous'*. This indicates a potential lack of understanding of what deployment means to children and their families; a separation from a parent is still a separation, whatever the nature of that deployment.

A further important context of the pre-school children's lives to emerge within the data were their pre-school settings and the stability and routines that they provided during a period of change at home. Maintaining the predictability of daily routines can be a protective factor to the healthy developmental course of young children during a period of parental deployment (Lieberman and Horn, 2013; Osofsky and Chartrand, 2013; Riggs and Riggs, 2011) and this was evident within the data, *'...her routine here has stayed the same, we've stayed the same...'* (Lucy's keyperson). Proximity of the pre-schools to the Army base, individual practitioner understanding of Army culture and links between the pre-schools and the Army were found to influence the levels to which a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) emerged within the pre-schools, centred around a shared understanding of the experiences of Army children. This appeared to influence their identity and ethos, as described by Isla's pre-school manager *'...actually because we're all in the environment... I think we are better placed to support that (deployment) because it's our everyday life'*. Tom's pre-school manager remarked *'...we're predominantly military wives'* and this shared identity extended into how she referred to their cohort of children and directed practices within the pre-school, *'we're 98% military, normally in our All About Me (part of the registration process) we're asking 'when's Dad's going away, does he go away often, how does he respond, how can we help?''*. The mothers with children in these settings felt that the pre-schools provided targeted and effective support for the children during the deployments due to being part of the Army community and understanding the nuances of Army life and culture. Lucy's mother noted *'It's been brilliant. Because they're so used to it here, I suppose... they've got some resources in here and they were sort of reading like, I think 'My Daddy's Going Away' sort of book...'*. For Jessica's mother, this was a valued

aspect of support during the repeated deployments that they had recently experienced as a family, *'because I think this nursery is obviously used to military families, so they know if she's a bit upset I can come in and say 'she's had a bad night, she was upset about Dad' and they'd be quite 'don't worry, we'll be ok with that'.*

Conversely, the mothers with children in pre-school settings further away from the Army base indicated a feeling that these settings had a lesser understanding of their Army culture. Daisy's mother felt that being in a nursery attached to a school two miles from the Army base influenced what she perceived to be the low levels of support that her children received during their father's five-and-a-half-month deployment, *'because they're not a military school, there's not many there, I think they don't, there's a new Headteacher, he doesn't understand, he's never worked with military children before'*. Comments from the pre-school practitioners reflected that this may be due to a lack of available training on the impact of service life on young children, leaving settings and practitioners to rely almost entirely on knowledge generated from their own community of practice. Whilst two of the pre-schools indicated that there was some support available via the Local Authority, all felt the majority of their expertise came directly from their experiences as both settings and as individuals. When asked to consider the factors that had helped their settings to develop an understanding of working with Army children, one manager responded *'honestly, experience... I can honestly say I have never had training... or attended anything about how we can support those children or deployment or what comes from being a military family'* (Tom's pre-school manager). A perceived lack of cultural understanding of Army families in third party educational organisations - particularly Ofsted - was raised as a concern by four of the six participating pre-schools.

The following model represents the implications of the findings of this study for practitioners and policy-makers seeking to understand and support young Army children's wellbeing during a parental deployment:

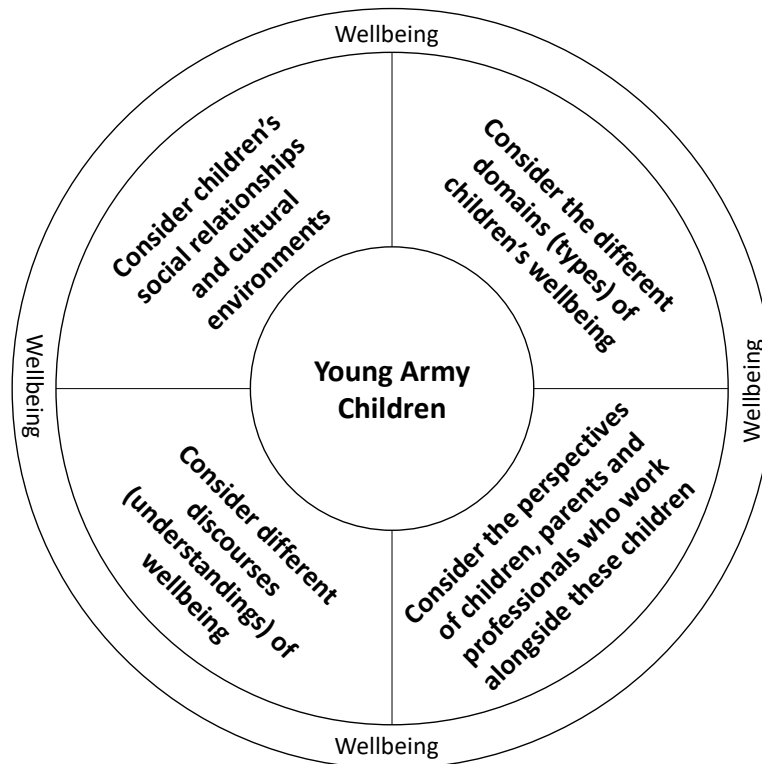


Fig.1 A model of four factors to be considered for understanding young Army children's wellbeing

Further research is needed to examine this model relating to children from Naval and Air Force families, both in the British and International context. Future research could also apply this model to young children facing lengthy separation from a parent in other diverse family contexts, such as where a parent is imprisoned or works away from home for prolonged periods of time.

Conclusion

Four conclusions are drawn from this study, with implications for targeted support for children experiencing a parental deployment:

- 1) Different domains (types) of wellbeing are both impacted by, and have an impact upon, pre-school children's deployment-related experiences.

Whilst wellbeing is an entangled and holistic concept, exploring its specific domains provides a more accurate picture of how different aspects are impacted by a parental deployment and how policy and practice may better support these domains. Furthermore, this approach provides insights into how pre-existing aspects of children's wellbeing also offer both resilience and risk in terms of providing the resources to cope with the adversity of being separated from a key caregiver. Pre-school children's deployment-related wellbeing can be conceptualised in terms of psychological, physical, social and cognitive domains. This list may not yet be exhaustive and could provide a focus for future research. Understanding how different domains of young children's wellbeing are impacted by a parental deployment could lead to more targeted support within educational and Armed Forces policy and practice.

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

Pre-school Army children do not exist within a vacuum, they are individuals who are part of families, homes, social relationships, educational settings and their wider communities. These occur within a specific cultural and historical time which, in turn, both influences the types of deployments that children are exposed to (both wartime and peacetime) and the support available to themselves and their families. Service children of any age, in both the British and international context, should be viewed as active and embedded members of their social and cultural worlds. Children – and their at-home parents – were found to receive support through the variety of relationships occurring within their early years settings. Armed Forces and educational policy should therefore look to ensure that young children have access to early years provision during a time of parental deployment. A key relationship to support during a parental deployment is that between the child and their at-home caregiver.

- 3) Drawing on different discourses of wellbeing leads to a more holistic understanding of this term in the context of pre-school service children experiencing a deployment.

Viewing wellbeing through different conceptual lenses affords the opportunity for multiple perspectives on young children's experiences during a parental deployment. This study has drawn upon three understandings of wellbeing; the philosophical, psychological and medical/health discourses, and future research may wish to expand on this list. Drawing upon different discourses of wellbeing is found to afford the opportunity to reframe young children's deployment-related wellbeing away from a deficit approach of observable problematised behaviours towards a more positive and holistic approach which considers the reasons behind such behaviours. Whilst parental deployment can be immensely stressful and can have a negative impact on wellbeing domains, children may possess individual, social and cultural protective factors that can lead to resilience during such times.

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

This study finds that children aged three to four years are capable of representing their experiences of a parental deployment, and therefore their subjective views should be sought in research, policy and practice that looks to understand and support their deployment-related wellbeing. Gathering multiple perspectives of the at-home parent, pre-school practitioners and the children themselves affords the opportunity to understand the children's experiences from a variety of viewpoints, building up a more accurate picture of their wellbeing during this time.

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