

Article

Moving Beyond Mosaic: Co-Creating Educational and Psychosocial Resources Using Military Children's Voices

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Abstract: The Mosaic approach has been effectively used to gather children's voices in early childhood settings using a children's voices framework, although research translation using these voices is less reported. This paper bridges this gap by reporting on the voices of young children from military and veteran families and the free, narrative-based resources co-created using these voices to strengthen children's capacity to survive and thrive in these families. Children from military families can experience frequent relocations, multiple and prolonged parental deployments and heightened anxiety about the safety of the member parent. Children from military and veteran families might also experience the challenges of living with a parent who is injured (physically, mentally and/or morally). The children's voices gathered in an initial study revealed four themes about their experiences in Australian military and veteran families, namely, (i) Department of Defence supports, (ii) communication, (iii) acculturation and ritual, and (iv) narrative. The research team worked with the affected community and partners to co-create resources that aligned with these themes. To achieve this, the team conducted an additional online survey with community members who had lived experience in military and veteran families, along with research partners and professionals who supported these families. The aim was to identify the types of resources and content they felt would best support children's psychosocial development. The children's voices, subsequent research data, and the literature were woven together to co-create free, online research-based educational and psychosocial resources to strengthen the coping strategies of young children from these families. This will interest those who aim for children's voices not only to be heard but to have an impact on the world.

Keywords: Mosaic approach; children's voices; co-creation; co-production; family narratives; military families; bibliotherapy; psychosocial development; socio-ecological



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1. Introduction

Since the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(1989\)](#), educators and researchers have increasingly championed the importance of listening to children's voices. Participatory research frameworks have been developed to create ways for the voices of participants to be used to better support the populations we study ([Egid et al., 2021](#); [Ranta, 2023](#); [Wall & Robinson, 2022](#)).

Despite this, using research translation (also known as knowledge translation and knowledge mobilisation) to utilise these voices is often absent from the literature, and yet research translation is imperative (Z. S. Morris et al., 2011). This is because there are many challenges facing educators and support workers as they assist potentially vulnerable families. For example, young children from Australian Defence Force (ADF) families encounter similar experiences to those of children in military and veteran families (hereafter military families) in other countries (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; McGuire et al., 2012). This includes frequent relocations (Ormeno et al., 2020), multiple and prolonged parental deployment and training episodes (Sullivan et al., 2019), anxiety about the parent's safety (Lester et al., 2016), and the impact of a service-related injury on family life (Watson & Osborne, 2025). It is worth noting that being part of a military family has many positive aspects, which can provide numerous protective factors (Hinojosa et al., 2022). These include pride in the parents' work, being part of a supportive military or veteran family community, stable employment with many employee benefits, experiencing living in various locations, and family role flexibility when the member parent is away. Despite these protective factors, the wellbeing of children in these families can be adversely affected due to the cumulative impacts of the parents' military service on family life (Blamey et al., 2019). Research on how young children experience and understand military family life, including parental deployment and family relocations, has mainly been limited to secondary data from parents. This includes Australian studies by Frederick and Siebler (2023), McFarlane (2009), and McGuire et al. (2012). International studies reveal the stresses of military family life for children and parents. In such studies, when children's wellbeing within military families was addressed, it was often from a psychological deficit-based approach; an approach that Siebler (2009, p. 298) described as requiring a paradigm shift:

...the findings of this study suggested children and adolescents struggle with many serious issues, and it is important to gain a fuller understanding of their experiences. As silent sufferers, children are not at the front-line of the Department's family support response and are likely to be a population at considerable risk.

The lead author's PhD study (Rogers, 2017) entitled 'Young children's understandings and experiences of parental deployment within an ADF family' sought to privilege 2 to 5-year-old children's voices, aimed to address this gap. This study employed a combined strength and resilience-based approach to determine what children experienced in these families, how they were coping, and what supports they used. The study also drew on the voices of their early childhood educators (hereafter referred to as educators) and parents as sources of knowledge, thereby supporting the researcher's understanding of the children's data. This was the first study to work with educators within Australia; however, Macdonald (2017) has since explored school teachers' relationships with education development liaison officers funded by the Australian military organisation.

The experiences shared by the children were identified to involve the following themes: Department of Defence supports, communication tools, ritual and acculturation, and narrative. The research also identified the importance of developing coping strategies and children's exposure to models of resilience. Surprisingly, the results also revealed a severe lack of age and culturally appropriate resources to build children's ability to make sense of their experiences and support their psychosocial development before starting school. The parents communicated how isolated and unsupported they felt, and educators reported the difficulty of adapting the existing primary (elementary) school-aged Australian resources to meet the particular needs of children arising from their military family experiences. Educators and parents requested young children's e-storybooks, apps, and programs to support their efforts in assisting these potentially vulnerable children, as well as information to support them in their endeavours to assist the children.

1.1. Research Context

This paper builds on the findings and recommendations of the lead author's PhD study (Rogers, 2017) by presenting a subsequent research project—the Child and Family Resilience Programs co-creation study (CFRP). The CFRP aimed to co-create free, tested, online research-based psychosocial resources grounded in research and co-created with individuals who have lived or are living in military families (i.e., with lived and living experience). Drawing on the voices of participants in the original PhD study, alongside relevant literature and new narratives from the co-creation process, the CFRP study illustrates how research findings can be meaningfully translated into practical, accessible support tools.

The CFRP study addresses the significant gap between research and practice, which is often experienced in many fields of research (see Glasgow & Emmons, 2007; Granek & Nakash, 2016; J. E. Morris & Paris, 2022; Searles et al., 2016). By integrating the PhD study findings and the CFRP study, this paper offers a model for bridging the gap between evidence and real-world application, ensuring that children's voices are heard and utilised.

The link between the PhD study and the CFRP study forms a central focus for this manuscript. As illustrated in Figure 1, the research process involved using the PhD findings to address the lack of research-based resources available for young children from military families. This involved translating research into easily accessible resources and working with those with lived and living experience of military families and professionals who assist them, to build suitable, supportive resources. This will be described in more detail in subsequent sections.

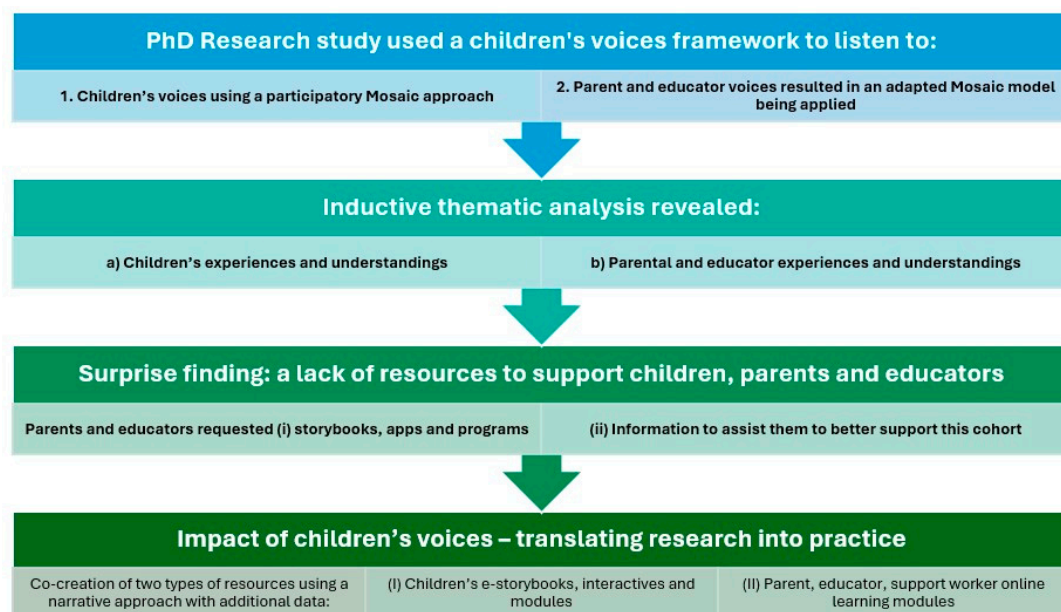


Figure 1. The process of gathering children's voices and then translating the research.

1.2. Children's Voices Framework

Young children's voices have largely been absent in the military family literature. In describing marginalised voices, Roy (2004, para. 4) notes, 'We know of course there's really no such thing as the "voiceless". There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard'. Indeed, similar to many other countries, the Australian Government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in 1990, meaning children's opinions must be listened to and considered when adults make decisions that affect them; however, there remains considerable debate as to how best to action this intention. Prior to 1990, the perceived challenge in including children's voices in research was that they were

not considered competent communicators. Early researchers in this field challenged this notion, claiming that children are adept communicators, but they communicate differently to adults, so adults need to learn different ways to listen and research (Mazzoni & Harcourt, 2014). They also argue that children are experts in their own lives and have much to say about their own experiences (Clark & Statham, 2005). These concepts were employed by Clark and Moss (2011) to create a framework for listening to children's voices, as depicted in Figure 2.

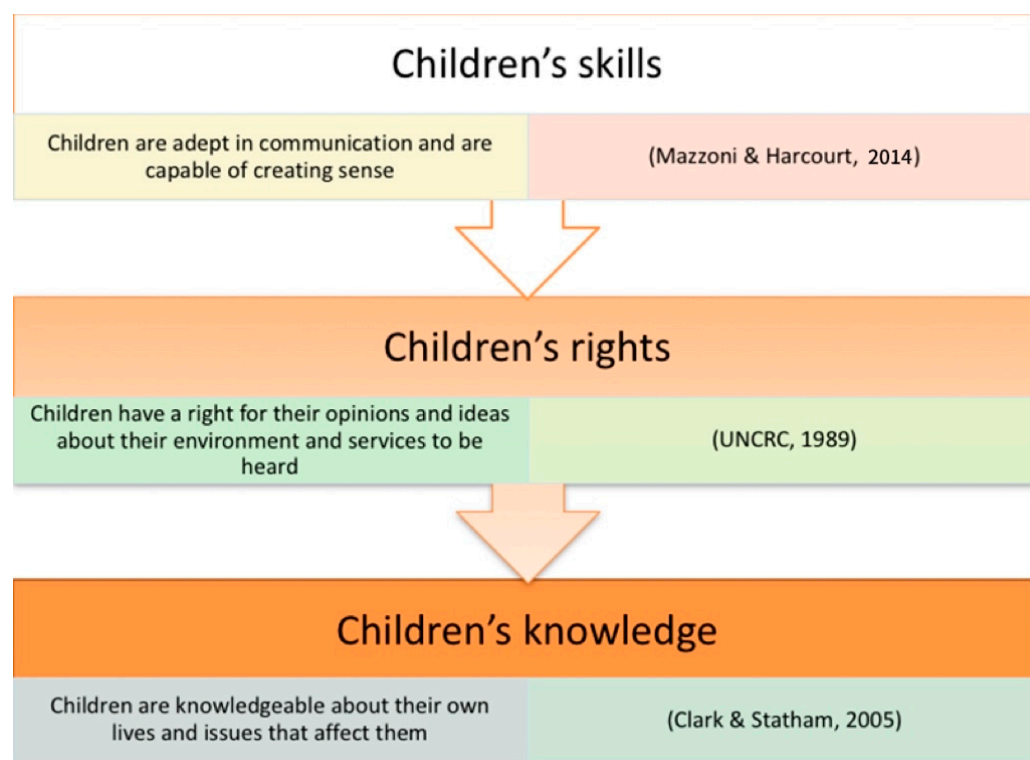


Figure 2. A framework for listening to children's voices (Mazzoni & Harcourt, 2014; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; Clark & Statham, 2005).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) does not imply that children's rights are greater than those of adults; it merely suggests that children's knowledge about their own lives and opinions can assist adults in making more informed decisions about issues that affect children (Clark & Moss, 2011).

1.3. Aims of the Two Studies

The aims of the PhD study included (a) giving young Australian children of military families a voice along with their families and educators about what they experience within military families, and (b) examining the coping strategies, supports, and resources already being used to support these children to cope with military family life. Building on this, the CFRP study explored two key areas: (c) how to utilise children's voices to co-create resources that reflect their lives in young children's literature, and (d) how to co-create tools to support their psychosocial development within a military family.

1.4. Materials and Methods of the PhD Study

1.4.1. Participants and Ethics

Ethics approval was gained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of New England for the PhD research (HE13-233). The PhD study employed convenience sampling through the author's extended contacts and by researching with the

children, parents and educators at an early childhood education service situated next to a military base. Data were collected with nineteen children aged between 2 and 5 years; eleven boys and eight girls. These children represented eleven families, and six of the children were used for in-depth case studies. The families represented three Australian geographical states and four military bases. Almost all of the participants were from current serving families. The exceptions were one family that left the military during the study and another family that lost a parent in combat before the study commenced; both of these families were retained in the study. Informed consent was obtained from the parents, and parents and educators were informed about the topics that would be discussed with the children. This ensured that children's wellbeing could be monitored following the data collection activities. The children were asked to assent to be involved in each research activity, and their decisions were respected. Children were able to engage freely with the activity resources. For example, during drawing or craft activities, most children engaged with the data collection activity; however, some children created other objects outside of the topic. For example, one child drew a mermaid during a particular activity. These measures gave children the agency about when, how, and what they would engage with and share.

Parents and educators consented to being quoted using a pseudonym as secondary participants. Parents also provided the same consent for their children to be quoted using a pseudonym.

1.4.2. Methodological Approaches

To address the lack of children's voices in military family research, the PhD study applied an expanded version of the children's voices framework (see [Rogers & Boyd, 2020](#)). Educators' and parents' voices were also included as sources of knowledge to assist with the interpretation of the children's data. These parents were either civilian or veteran parents.

1.4.3. Mosaic Approach

The Mosaic approach was used to gather the children's voices. It is a form of qualitative participatory research in which participants are also researchers ([Clark & Moss, 2011](#)). This approach was originally used within the disability sector for non-verbal clients ([Clark & Moss, 2011](#)). Clark and other researchers quickly utilised this approach in early childhood settings because it allows young children to communicate in many different ways depending on both their preferences and their developing skills in communication ([Greenfield, 2011](#)). This supports the claim by [Malaguzzi \(1998\)](#) that children communicate using a hundred different languages. Thus, a large collection of small pieces of data was co-constructed and collected through drawings, chats, children's photos, family photos, craft, e-storybook elicitation, observations, and researcher journaling. As with a mosaic picture, the artist, or, in this case, the researcher, arranges the data into themes to create small pictures, and then these are arranged to make a whole scene. In the results section below, we do not include all the drawings and quotes from the children; rather, the overall findings are presented with a few examples in the interests of brevity.

1.4.4. Narrative Approach

A narrative approach was used to gather information from parents and educators. Narrative research involves collecting stories from participants and analysing them to make sense of their experiences ([Polkinghorne, 1988](#)).

1.4.5. Analysis

The children's data were shared with other children within the sample, allowing them to expand on, amend, or confirm the initial themes identified by the lead author. The process was supported by parents and educators who also contributed to the inductive

thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the children's data, confirming themes and interpreting data—a type of member checking (McKim, 2023). For example, the lead author and parents would exchange data and discuss its meaning, collaboratively refining themes as needed. This helped ensure that diverse voices were included in the analysis, in keeping with a participatory approach. Additionally, a socio-ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) lens was applied to the analysis by the lead author to interpret the different levels of support and stress within each system:

- i. Individual (characteristics of the individual);
- ii. Microsystem (players with significant, immediate contact with the child—e.g., parents, educators);
- iii. Mesosystem (how well the players in the microsystem work together to support the child);
- iv. Exosystem (players, community, and objects affecting other aspects of the child, extended family, parents' workplaces, and community life);
- v. Macrosystem (culture, economy, government, environmental and geopolitical factors impacting the child and family);
- vi. Chronosystem (changes to the systems over time).

1.5. Results of the PhD Study

1.5.1. Family Voices and Coping Strategies, Supports and Resources

During this study, the children were able to give voice to their experiences in these families through a range of research activities according to their preferences. Additionally, their parents and educators could share their experiences in supporting the children, and their voices were added to the data as secondary sources of knowledge. Thematic analysis revealed four themes that were important in their experiences in their families (see Figure 3). Also presented with these themes are the resources, coping strategies, supports, and resources the children and families were using to support the children to cope with military family stressors.

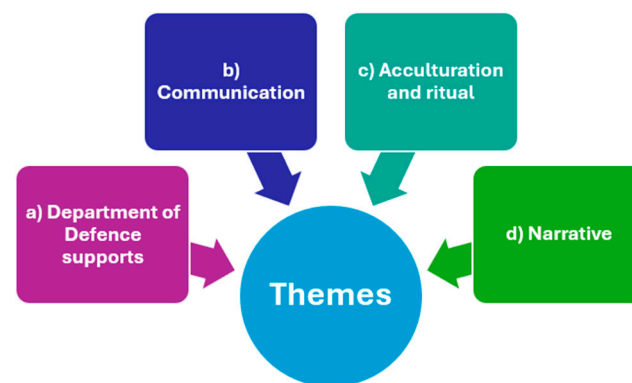


Figure 3. PhD study themes.

Throughout these discussions, the socio-ecological system will be presented in italics within parentheses to show how different systems impacted the child and their family and vice versa. For example, geopolitical conflicts (*macrosystem*) resulted in the job requirements of the member parent to include a lengthy deployment (*exosystem/chronosystem*), which took them away from the family (*microsystem*) and impacted each child differently (*individual*).

1.5.2. Department of Defence Supports

Participant families, educators, and children gave voice to their experiences using Australian Department of Defence supports. These included the early childhood education ser-

vice, where many military families attended, Defence housing, partner education programs, care packages for the deployed parent, and access to Defence-funded communication.

Various participants identified sources of support supplied by the Australian Department of Defence (*exosystem*). These included reserved places at early childhood education and care services (*microsystem*) near the military base where their partners worked. Other supports included a permanent and relatively well-paid job, as well as access to benefits such as subsidised housing and subsidised partner education (*exosystem*). While parents were deployed, family members could send a care package each week to their deployed spouse or parent for free, helping them stay in contact. This could include a cooking activity with the children, as they made their parents' favourite foods and posted them in a parcel. Additionally, military members could generally contact their families using virtual video calls (Table 1), which were funded by the military. However, these calls could be challenging for the at-home parent to navigate due to time differences, leading to calls when the children were overtired and unable to engage.

Table 1. Children's voices from four themes.

Theme	Example of Visual Data	Explanation and Examples of Other Data
Department of Defence supports		Sam (4 years) posts his drawings to his deployed father as part of the postage-free care package each week.
Communication		Brian's (3 years) and Davina's (1 year) father making them laugh on a video call during deployment.
Acculturation and ritual		Emily (4 years) cuddling the Care Bear dressed in a military uniform during her father's deployment.

Table 1. Cont.

Theme	Example of Visual Data	Explanation and Examples of Other Data
Narrative		Blake's drawing (left): <i>My Dad is getting in the car to go to Ayers Rock on deployment</i> (Blake, 5 years).
		<i>Dad went away on a plane. He's coming home after Easter</i> (Bethany, 4 years).
		<i>I miss my daddy. He in Afghanistan</i> (Emily, 2 years).
		<i>I not go Afghanistan. Not Mummy. Only Army men go Afghanistan</i> (Emily, 2 years).

1.5.3. Communication

The children who participated in this study stayed connected with their absent parent when they were away on deployment or training episodes. They employed various methods, including digital communication technologies such as email, phone calls, texting, messaging, virtual video calls, postcards, and parcels, depending on what was available (*macrosystem*). Children provided photos (see Table 1) that their parents had taken, depicting them as they engaged with their deployed parent in various ways. The parents commented that all these efforts to engage with the absent parent improved the children's communication and technology skills and facilitated a smoother reunion and reintegration of the absent parent (*microsystem*). Communication helps military families stay connected but can increase stress if too much information is shared or if there are access issues, a concern relayed by some families. Parents also shared that it was challenging to maintain closeness and immediacy in the relationship between the child and the absent parent if they were deployed for many months. This was painful for the absent parents if they felt the child was losing interest in communicating with them, as topics of conversation dwindled with time.

1.5.4. Acculturation and Ritual

Acculturation was prevalent within all levels of the family socio-ecological system. Some of this acculturation was achieved through rituals, such as commemorative services (*macrosystem*) attended by the family in the community, at the parents' workplace (*exosystem*), or practised in the early childhood service (*microsystem*). In this study, children were observed playing with military uniforms and military toy figures and vehicles at the early childhood education service (*microsystem*) which is a form of acculturation. They were also seen wearing medals given to them by their parents' military unit (*exosystem*) for being brave and allowing their parents to go away which is another type of acculturation. Additionally, parents would talk about the service and sacrifice of their partner and family. In Table 1, Emily (2 years old) is seen cuddling a teddy bear dressed in Army uniform. The toy is called a Care Bear and is provided by the parents' military unit, which was given to her when her parent was about to deploy, and another was given to her deploying father. To comfort her, Emily was told by her father that if she hugged her bear when she missed him, he would be able to feel the hug through his bear, which he would take on deployment.

1.5.5. Narrative

In the participant families, narratives were used to promote children's understanding of the events and changes within the family (*microsystem*). These simple family narratives

were reinforced by parents, siblings, peers (*microsystem*), extended family (*exosystem*), educators (*microsystem*), communities, and the military organisation (*exosystem*).

Examples of the children's family narratives can be seen in Table 1. Bethany (4 years) did not initially have such a narrative due to her parent leaving for a six-month deployment after only ten days' notice. This meant she struggled to articulate where her father was and when he was coming home when asked by educators. After supporting her through the research activities, she was eventually able to articulate the narrative, as shown in Table 1. In one family, the parent outlined how the member parent would explain he was going on deployment to their daughter each night for three weeks leading up to his deployment. By drawing on a globe with a marker, he would explain that only he could go, because it was only a place for Army personnel. Other parents told their children they were going to help people in other countries on peacekeeping deployments. Thus, a system of justification and sacrifice was created and sustained through the careful use of meta-narratives throughout the children's ecosystem. This meta-narrative was used by the ADF within the workplace (*exosystem*), the Australian Government and media (*macrosystem*), the community (*exosystem*), and the family (*microsystem*).

1.5.6. Surprise Finding: A Dearth of Resources for Families

An unexpected finding in the PhD study was the dearth of age- and culturally appropriate resources available for young children before they started school, which parents reported made them feel isolated and unsupported. It is essential to equip parents with the knowledge and skills to support their children in their unique context, given the importance of the family and parents as the child's first and most significant teacher (Kong & Lu, 2024). Despite their best efforts, educators reported feeling unsupported in assisting these children and understanding the families. Both were trying to adapt primary (elementary) school resources and US-based resources. However, they realised that the children found it difficult to relate to challenging language and concepts, as well as different terminology, uniforms, flags, and military culture.

To address this gap in resources, a research team was formed to apply for funding to create free, online, research-based resources to support Australian children from military families as part of the CFRP. Following the receipt of philanthropic funding, a steering committee comprising representatives from the affected community and its partners was established. The resources were co-created with these affected communities and partners, as well as other identified organisations and individuals who volunteered their time to be involved. Extra lived and living experience narratives, along with narratives gathered from practitioners (educators and support workers such as military social workers), were woven with the children's narratives from the PhD study and themes from the military family research literature during the co-creation process. Additionally, teams of volunteers, including those with lived experience and retired academics, served as editors and testers to refine the resources before their formal evaluation by end users. This was a time-consuming and laborious process as described in the next section, but it ensured we were using accepted terminology and tone and creating usable, relevant content in the CFRP study.

2. Methods for the CFRP Study

Building on the PhD study, the CFRP team explored ways to use the children's voices to co-create resources so these children could see their lives reflected in young children's literature (Sevón et al., 2025; Vargas et al., 2022). To achieve this, further research was conducted to co-create the psychosocial resources using the PhD data.

Two new ethics approvals were gained from the University of New England. The first objective was to gather additional data from a broader group of affected community members and partners regarding the desired resources to support the children (HE20-027). This group included adult children from military families, parents, educators, support workers, and other service providers. The second ethics approval was to co-create resources using the data from the PhD study and other sources (HE21-027). Data were collected using an online survey that asked participants about the types of resources they believed would benefit children and what specific content they thought should be included. Similar information was also gathered from CFRP team members with lived experience, research partners, and those with lived experience within the affected community.

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling, targeting individuals from the affected community as well as professionals assisting these families, such as educators and support workers. Recruitment was conducted via email to partners and service providers, as well as through social media (Rogers et al., 2021). Recognising that some military families are reluctant to engage in surveys due to fears that the information might be given to the military organisation or a government department, participants were also given the option to contact the research team directly via email.

The data from all sources were sorted into categories according to the viability of the ideas within the CFRP study budget. Priority was given to the ideas that were very common and somewhat common, rather than those that were outliers. Using these data, we also gathered the ideas from parents, educators, and service providers who were part of the co-creation team and project steering committee (Rogers et al., 2022).

The team then wove together the children's voices from the PhD study with themes in the military family research literature, utilising the voices of adult children and parents from these families who were involved in the co-creation process. Composite stories from service providers (family workers, educators, social workers, and therapists) who support these families were also added. Then, the project team, comprising education, psychology, and family researchers, as well as individuals with lived and living experience, and service providers, co-created the resources, seeking feedback from various affected community members and those with lived experience to improve them (see Rogers et al., 2025). These online survey tests for suitability included parents, educators, and support workers, some of whom used the draft resources by themselves, and others used them with children (although the children were not participants).

It is essential to note that children did not directly participate in these tests, nor were they involved in co-creating the CFRP resources; instead, their voices, as informed by the PhD study, informed the content. Importantly, the affected community and partners were part of the co-creation throughout the entire process.

3. Results

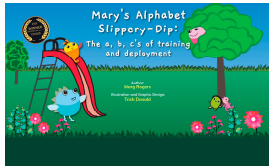
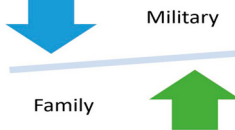
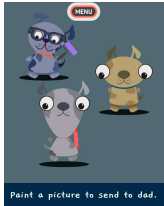
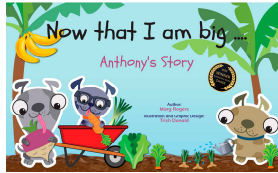
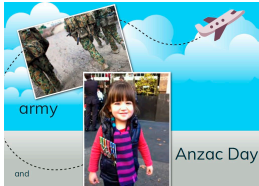
3.1. Co-Created Tools to Support the Children's Psychosocial Development

This co-creation process enabled the CFRP project team to develop tools that support the children's psychosocial development, aligning with the four themes identified in the PhD findings. That is, the Department of Defence supports, communication, acculturation, ritual, and narrative (see Figure 3).

Regarding Department of Defence supports, Table 2 contains four rows (1–4) with three columns each (A, B, and C). 'Mary's Alphabet Slippery Dip', one of the resources developed (row 1, column A), depicts some of the supports the CFRP team has made available to families. These included family days hosted by the military unit, including children's rides, barbecues, and family activities. Military-specific information sections were included in the learning modules accompanying the storybook to ensure families

were aware of the available social events. Sometimes, knowing that support is available, even if it is not utilised, can reassure families. The second example (1B) contains mental health information and links to support services. The third example illustrates a module that offers information and practical activities for planning a military parent's transition as they leave the forces to become a civilian, a period of heightened stress for families (1C).

Table 2. Examples of co-created resources to address themes from the findings.

	Column A	Column B	Column C
1. Department of Defence supports	Research-based storybook: <i>Mary's Alphabet Slippery-Dip</i> , depicts Unit Family Day events. 	Parent online module: about parents' mental health and wellbeing explains potential family stressors and coping strategies. 	Parent online module: about transitioning from the military and the available supports. 
2. Communication	Children's interactive: encourages children to draw a picture to send to their absent parent. 	Research-based storybook: <i>Now That I Am Big: Anthony's Story</i> , in which the main character uses various communication methods with the absent parent. 	Project books: facilitate communication through shared interest activities both before and after the parent leaves. 
3. Acculturation and ritual	Research-based storybook: <i>Mary's Alphabet Slippery-Dip</i> , depicts children's involvement in commemorative events. 	Children's interactive: <i>We Remember: Australia's Story</i> supports children in making and laying wreaths. 	Research-based storybook: <i>We Remember: Australia's Story</i> teaches children about rituals during commemorative events. 
4. Narrative	Educator and support worker modules: provide explanations about the importance of family narratives and practical ways to support them. 	Research-based bibliotherapy storybook: <i>So, Things Have Been a Bit Different: Ben's Story</i> , in which the main character learns how to cope with a parent's injury through a grandparent's story. 	Personalised storybooks: downloadable PowerPoint versions of the narratives are provided to support children's storytelling. 

Regarding communication, our co-created children's e-storybooks and interactives feature children using a range of digital and traditional communication with their absent parents. For example, Table 2(2A) depicts a page in an interactive version of 'Now that I am Big: Anthony's Story', where children are prompted to draw a picture that they can download and email to their absent parent. The static version of the same story features the main characters communicating with their absent parent through phone calls, emails, letters, and parcels (2B). These resources can act as springboards for discussions between the child and their educator or parent, assisting the child to normalise their experiences of having a parent who works away. Importantly, it can support educators in facilitating communication between the child and the absent parent. To support the relationship between the child and the absent parent, we also co-created a module with many project books for the child and the absent parent to work on together (2C). These projects are designed so that parents can start working on them with their child before leaving and continue with the support of the at-home parent or caregiver in their absence. This creates a focus for some of their communication, as the parent can ask about the progress of ongoing projects, such as gardening or photo collections.

Regarding acculturation and ritual, participating in a commemorative event is depicted in a page of the e-storybook 'Mary's Alphabet Slippery Dip' (Table 2, 3A), allowing the children to see their lives reflected in children's literature. To support children's understanding and participation in such commemorative services, interactives were co-created to support children's skills in creating and laying wreaths, understanding rituals, and supporting veterans (3B and 3C). These are from the interactive and static versions of the e-storybook 'We Remember: Australia's Story'.

Regarding narrative, modules were co-created to support these narratives, building the knowledge, skills, and confidence of educators, support workers, and parents to create and support these family narratives, thereby enhancing children's understanding (Table 2, 4A). In the bibliotherapy e-storybook 'So, Things Have Been a Bit Different: Ben's Story', a family narrative supports children's understanding of a parent's injury (Table 2, 4B). The final photo (Table 2, 4C) shows a downloadable PowerPoint version of an e-storybook for educators to use with children to personalise their own narratives based on the e-storybook 'D is For Deployment: Ann Raps It Up', which explores a child's experience of their parent's deployment.

3.1.1. Outcomes of the Co-Creation Study

The CFRP co-created content included a suite of online research-based children's e-storybooks, created from the narratives of these children and their families from the military community. Access to storybooks featuring characters with similar experiences and emotions helps children to feel understood and strengthens their sense of belonging and identity (Koss & Daniel, 2018). These storybooks scaffold children's capacity to cope with the stresses of military family life through storybooks suitable for the children and their peers. Additionally, bibliotherapy storybooks were created for children whose parents sustained a service-related physical, mental, and/or moral injury. These are for one-to-one readings between the child and a caring adult, such as a parent or support worker. At the end of all storybooks are two pages of educational activities to further facilitate interactions between a child and their educator, parent, or support worker. The start of each storybook contains a foreword by an educator or support worker who assists these families, or someone with lived and living experience. These forewords provide encouragement to the families from someone familiar with their experiences. Similarly, at the end of the book, plain English research information is provided about the themes presented in the story. These are designed to support adults in better assisting these children, as the majority of

parents and educators indicated a lack of knowledge, skills, and confidence in supporting this cohort with military family life (see, for example, [Rogers et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, four suites of resources, in the form of free online learning modules, were created for children and their educators, parents, and support workers.

To date, fourteen storybooks have been co-created:

- eight have been developed that explore parents working away during deployment;
- three examine a variety of families experiencing parents working away in different industries (for example, the fly-in-fly-out employment model used at a number of remote mining sites),
- one examines the challenges of relocations,
- four explore the challenges/changes within a family when a parent becomes injured or develops a work-related mental health condition, and
- one book explores Defence family/cultural rituals such as commemoration services.

Some books are interactive to deepen children's learning; whilst it was deemed desirable to make all books interactive, limits in funding made this impossible. The books have been received positively and are being used by major military family support agencies in Australia and internationally, with the results of some tests for suitability published (see [Rogers et al., 2024, 2025](#)) and others in preparation. More storybooks are being developed with international partners in the UK and Canada, and some pre-existing storybooks are currently being culturally and linguistically translated for Canadian families.

3.1.2. Sharing the Process

Part of participatory research principles is that the results of the research are used to better the lives of the research participants ([Egid et al., 2021](#); [Gallagher, 2008](#)). In this instance, apart from thesis and academic publications, efforts have been made to increase community awareness and capacity to support military families through research-based news articles in sites such as *The Conversation* and education and mental health news sites. The aim of these non-academic channels of communication is to ensure that information about the resources and their accessibility is made widely available. It is through channels such as these that educators and parents, who are not part of the original study groups and are not connected to the networks used by the study, can learn about the challenges these families face and how they might support them, thereby building community capacity. Additionally, such research translation provides the target cohort with the opportunity to learn about and access the CFRP study resources to support their families. This is important if the success of research is to be measured by its impact rather than by traditional metrics.

4. Discussion

Gathering children's voices is a crucial first step in enhancing the lives of young children. Analysing these voices using a framework that reveals the different socio-ecological systems ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979](#)) is crucial for understanding the complexity of their experiences and challenges ([Rogers, 2017](#)). Using these voices requires care and reporting in the literature, not just for the content of what children share, but also for the processes used to ensure these voices have an impact. In the CFRP study, the co-created resources emerged from the findings of the PhD study and narratives gathered during the co-creation process, representing the translation of knowledge gained from the children into resources that fill a research-identified gap. This is the first time that Australian young children's narratives from military families have been voiced, and those voices have been acted upon in a way that enabled them to see their lives reflected in young children's literature. Having their voices and experiences present in children's literature builds children's sense of identity and belonging ([Savsar, 2018](#)) and supports children's understanding and coping strategies

to thrive, rather than survive, in military family life. Phipps et al. (2016) developed a useful model for co-creation (also known as co-production), illustrating the flow from research to dissemination, uptake, implementation, and impact. Each flow stage includes potential outcomes, and in Figure 4, the outcomes we have experienced thus far in the project are highlighted using bold text. These outcomes have been identified through our suitability testing and feedback from our research partners. Importantly, Phipps et al. (2016) emphasise that this flow progression is repeated cyclically as the knowledge creation (also known as knowledge mobilisation) process creates new research.

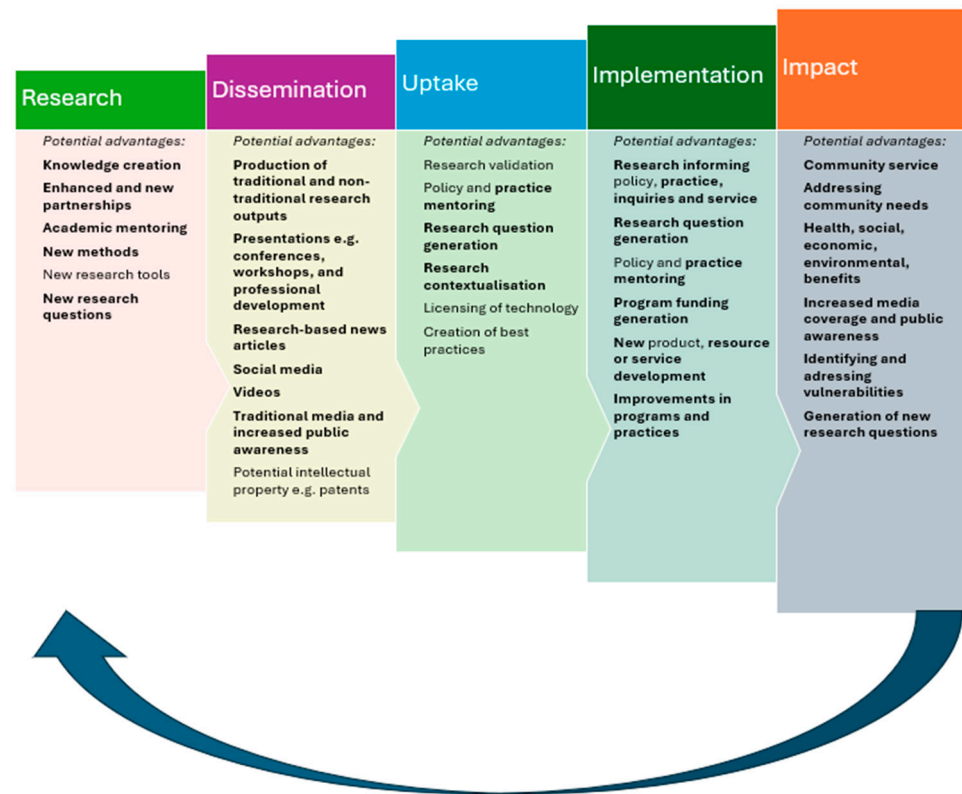


Figure 4. CFRP's co-created pathway to impact (adapted from Phipps et al., 2016).

Such co-creation methods are crucial given that, internationally (Cramm et al., 2020; Cramm et al., 2016) and in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022), there is recognition that the risks faced by children from military families are significant. For example, the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide—Interim Report argues that 'military deployment, as well as the mental and behavioural disorders arising from military service, can then increase the risk that ... children ... develop mental health disorders' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, p. 128). Having identified this risk, as noted by both the Royal Commission and the aforementioned PhD study, the creation of these resources provides a springboard for conversations between children and their parents, educators, or support workers, allowing them to discuss changes and challenges within their families. This platform is an essential tool that can be used to create opportunities for ongoing conversations, allowing these caring adults to gain insight into children's feelings and understandings. This enables adults to scaffold different coping strategies and narratives that support children's wellbeing.

In addition to the importance of children seeing their experiences and voices represented in children's literature, there is the flow-on effect for parents and educators. In the PhD study, parents and educators reported feeling isolated and ignored because the lack of age- and culturally appropriate resources for young children from these families meant

they felt unable to support children and families in ways they deemed appropriate. The CFRP study resources not only provided them with tools they could use with children and families but also gave them additional information to further their own understandings and skills. Tests for suitability of the resources (Rogers et al., 2024, 2025) demonstrated how much educators, parents, and support workers appreciated the resources and information provided.

Translating research into practice remains a challenge, and it is common for promising ideas identified in initial research (often postgraduate research) to be lost on the dusty shelves of academia. These ideas may be published behind firewalls in academic journals, but ultimately have little to no impact on practice. In the case of this research, translation into practice was only made possible by funding provided by philanthropic, educational, and research organisations, and recognition of the work's practical impact remains limited. For example, the recognition of the storybooks in the institutional research metrics continues to be a challenge, remaining elusive despite the research outputs winning a national Social Sciences award and being internationally recognised and utilised. Thus, a lag remains between many academic institutions claiming to value research translation and impact, and being willing to systematically recognise and reward such time-consuming, innovative and challenging endeavours.

The evidence of the impact of storybooks on practice and the lives of children and families is substantial (Hashemy et al., 2012; Tubbs, 2015). As academic researchers, we have to reflect on where our responsibilities lie. To further academic careers, pure research published in recognised, prestigious academic journals is essential. As early childhood professionals, should we instead recognise our contributions through impact on practice? Do we measure the value of our work by the extent to which it improves the lives of young children and their families and by the extent to which early childhood teachers, social workers, and parents harness it? It is interesting to note that the financial tools needed to translate this research into practice largely came not from academic funding sources or the Department of Defence but from philanthropic funding. Do we need to develop our relationship with philanthropic organisations further in order to translate more research into practice? And to what extent do we need to challenge the university systems that not only do not recognise this work but systematically discourage it because it does not contribute to the current acceptable research outcomes? The early childhood sector continues to actively work toward professionalisation, and the answers to these questions are an important part of this journey as we seek to identify what is important, what is valued, and what needs to be supported for our profession to flourish.

4.1. Limitations

There are several limitations in the CFRP study. For example, funding limitations meant resources could only be co-created for children aged 2–8 years, rather than for older children and teenagers. Additionally, funding limitations meant we could only implement some of the recommendations from affected communities and partners regarding resource types, content, and suggested edits to enhance the resources.

In both studies, researcher bias can be problematic, as researchers may be more inclined to listen to certain narratives and report them, or utilise those in the co-created resources, while inadvertently ignoring others. To avoid this, a large team with many partners is involved, which potentially reduces the risk of researcher bias that could occur with a single researcher.

4.2. Need for Further Research

There is a need for further research to enhance society's understanding of the unique cultural and geographical context in which military families are situated. Research should be conducted to develop culturally appropriate resources for these families, including extended family members, to enhance the mental and physical health of this cohort. Additionally, exploration of the translation of children's voices into impactful changes in practice, resources, or policy is essential. Evaluation research is required to measure the impact and effectiveness of CFRP resources.

4.3. Implications

Age- and culturally appropriate resources are necessary to support children and their families in coping with various aspects of military family life, enabling them to achieve the best possible outcomes.

The thematic analysis highlights the significance of themes such as Department of Defence supports, communication, acculturation, ritual, and narrative. It demonstrates how these themes can be effectively employed and incorporated into real-life resources designed to enhance the lives of military families. The four themes should also be considered by educators and health care professionals (e.g., counsellors, psychologists, nurses, support workers, and military social workers) when supporting military families.

5. Conclusions

This paper focused on two key areas: (a) the importance of research on children from military families and (b) the process of translating that research into practice. In relation to the former, the research identified issues faced by military families, along with feedback on the kinds of psychosocial resources that could be made available. In terms of the latter, the research illustrates how moving beyond traditional academic approaches, resources were co-created and made available to fill the gap identified in the earlier research. This latter work requires us to reflect on our responsibilities as academics, reflecting on whether we are addressing the needs of these children, teenagers and families. The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide reported the following:

the risk of intergenerational trauma runs high when children's needs are not seen and the required services are not put in place to support the child's psychosocial development.
(Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, p. 95)

This paper illustrates a process for combining traditional academic research with groundbreaking work, translating outcomes into practice. We hope other researchers will accept the challenge of undertaking similar work in their fields of expertise to better the lives of children and families worldwide.

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