

# Parental perceptions of social and emotional well-being of young children from Australian military families

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Many Australian Defence Force (ADF) and Veteran families are affected by the stressors of Defence family life, including frequent and prolonged parental deployments, and frequent relocations.

**Objective:** To address a gap in information about Defence and Veteran (hereafter Defence) parents' knowledge, confidence and resources to support their young children's well-being and build their resilience.

**Design:** This study used a mixed methods design to explore Defence parent's perceptions of their young children's (aged 2–8 years) social and emotional well-being and understanding of their children's responses to unique stressors as well as their confidence in providing support. Data from 41 parents were available.

**Findings:** Overall, parents reported positive well-being evaluation of their children. However, just over a third of parents also reported that their children rarely cope well on two indicators combined (adapting to new situations and sharing negative emotions with others). Significantly, more than half of the parents (61%) were only partially confident in their ability to assist their children to cope with unique stressors in military families. Qualitative data provided further insights into children's struggle with relocations and parental absence and the challenges parents face in supporting them. Parents reported having limited access to effective age- and culturally appropriate resources to support their young children.

**Discussion:** In a first-of-its kind study, we found that Australian Defence parents reported their young children were coping on most of the key well-being indicators. However, awareness of currently available supports for children remains a barrier as well as access to contextualised, age- and culturally appropriate resources are lacking.

**Conclusion:** There is a need for access to free, quality, online, research-based Australian resources to support young children from Defence families, especially for those living in regional and rural locations and are less likely to have access to mental health and other specialist supports.

Marg Rogers and Navjot Bhullar have contributed equally.

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## KEYWORDS

children, emotional well-being, military families, parenting, resources, social well-being

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Research reports promoting health strategies and policy initiatives in rural areas need to more broadly target families, such as Defence families, and individuals experiencing a range of circumstances.<sup>1</sup> The 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data revealed 5% of Australian households have a Defence or Veteran member, of which a third of the Defence families, and 50% of the Veteran families live in regional and rural communities.<sup>2</sup> Within Defence, 66% of permanent members are married or in a relationship, and 49% are categorised as members with dependents—essentially, personnel with spouses and/or children.<sup>3</sup> Defence members indicate family and work-life balance reasons contribute to decisions to discharge, meaning the impact of service on families has become an increasing concern for Australian military organisations, as they seek to recruit and retain personnel.

In this study, we define the ADF (also referred to as military) families as either Defence or Veteran families. Defence families are those with a currently serving member, whereas Veteran families are those with an ex-serving member (hereafter Defence families). Living in regional and rural Australian communities profoundly impacts the ability of residents to take advantage of delivery modalities and payment methods to access mental health services<sup>4</sup> despite having a high need for these services. Australian research reports that the Defence family members, especially partners of those deployed, experience unique caregiving stressors, poor marital adjustment and life satisfaction and significantly higher levels of depression, stress and anxiety, when compared with population norms.<sup>5</sup> In addition, in the absence of required specialist support, parents may not have the knowledge, skills and confidence to adequately support their children's well-being and build their resilience. Defence families, and partners of those deployed, experience stressors typically not automatically associated with civilian families. The very nature of Defence employment, that is, one based on regular relocations with little or no recourse, entails that partners and children live in a state of uncertainty. Therefore, children from Defence families may face long-term adversity that could have similarities to those experienced in rural areas:

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.<sup>6(p95)</sup>

### What is already known on this subject

- Defence service can cause significant social and emotional challenges to families
- Support to these families is limited and likely exacerbated in regional, rural and remote locations

### What this paper adds

- Parental perspective of young children's social and emotional well-being and perceived parenting challenges
- Summary of some resources and supports available
- Identifies gaps in resourcing and supports, and issues of access

## Children from military families

Children from Australian Defence families face many stressors,<sup>7,8</sup> including frequent and prolonged parental deployments, and parents training (for shorter periods) away from the family home.<sup>9</sup> Deployments are lengthy periods of service away from home (generally 5–9 months), whereas trainings are shorter periods of time (generally a few weeks, but up to 3 months). Discharge (transition to civilian life) can also be stressful for family members, during which they may need different support to the military member<sup>10</sup> who is able to access targeted Defence information post service and ex-service organisation mentoring. Research has concluded that the impacts of Defence service go beyond those experienced directly by the uniformed member; their family members are also affected by their association to the military personnel, with negative impacts on their general physical and mental well-being, access to employment opportunities and outcomes for children.<sup>10–12</sup> These impacts are similar across modern volunteer-based military organisations, including those in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. Assessing the impacts of Defence service on families is a complex process owing to the facets of Defence life. This was highlighted by one Australian study which have found parents (who were ADF members and/or their civilian partners with children) reporting

limited negative impacts of deployments on family life,<sup>13</sup> whereas most studies have found the opposite.<sup>7,8,14-16</sup> McGuire and colleagues<sup>13</sup> noted the sample characteristics of the ADF members and their families comprising fewer new ADF members and/or new younger couples were included in the study. Therefore, those surveyed were more likely to have established support networks and strategies for dealing with deployment-related separation. In this case, potential time delays between the deployment itself (commencing in 1999) and the study being conducted in 2011 also meant that Defence family members who were not coping, or who had left the ADF, were unlikely to be involved in the study.

Ongoing parental deployments and training requirements create high levels of household transitions, which are disruptive within the family household. For example, Defence service parents go away to train, then deploy, then return for periods of leave, then deploy again.<sup>15</sup> These disruptions affect children physically,<sup>14</sup> emotionally,<sup>15</sup> socially<sup>16</sup> and cognitively<sup>7</sup> (see the first two columns of Table A1 in the Appendix). Within a typical deployment cycle, there are pre-deployment training sessions away from home to prepare the Defence member, so household adjustments are required before, during and after the deployment. Longer deployments are more likely to include periods of leave, where the member may return to the family home for respite midway through the deployment creating another household transition, a challenging time for families with young children. Ongoing reunions and reintegrations can be problematic due to the inevitable changes and growth of each family member since they were living together.<sup>17,18</sup> In addition to the family impacts of the transitions associated with parental deployments, serving in war and peace-keeping zones and the overall nature of military culture may also negatively impact the Defence member.<sup>7</sup> Members are often exposed to traumatic events, and military culture itself can be traumatic for some members.<sup>11</sup> These negative impacts can result in members experiencing service-related injuries, medical and/or mental health conditions,<sup>19</sup> or moral injury,<sup>20</sup> which impacts family members. This was acknowledged in the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide:

Family members ... can be significantly affected when serving or ex-serving members experience poor mental or physical health. A key question becomes, 'who is caring for the family?' ... the impact of service and deployment has been detrimental to their wellbeing, particularly their mental health. These families are a vulnerable cohort.<sup>11(p87)</sup>

Due to secondary transference of trauma, or vicarious trauma, children and partners are also at risk of traumatisation.<sup>21</sup> Recent research has reported that:

A significant dimension of family welfare is the impact of trauma, parental suicidality, and adverse events on the psychosocial development of children.<sup>6(p98)</sup>

Relocations occur when the Defence member, and by default, the whole family is permanently posted to another location, and pose a major source of stress for military families.<sup>2</sup> For most Defence families, this occurs every 2 years, and sometimes more frequently. Babies and young children can be particularly affected by household stress associated with relocations.<sup>22</sup> Many children from Defence families who relocate need to attend multiple early childhood services and schools<sup>22</sup> and may have trouble bonding with educators, all conditions which may impact reaching their learning potential.<sup>23</sup> This was reflected in the 2019 Defence Families Survey, where respondents with dependent children indicated their children's education as the most important consideration regarding the Defence lifestyle.<sup>23</sup> Access to educational settings is often limited, and enrolment can be subject to waiting lists, making it impossible for Defence families to navigate due to frequent and sudden relocations. Children can also struggle to sustain lasting friendships due to frequent locations.<sup>23</sup>

While the challenges for military families are many, support for them in Australia has often been ad hoc.<sup>25</sup> There are barriers to access to support programs and services on offer for Defence families. For example, the Defence Census (2019) revealed that less than half (46%) of permanent ADF members with dependent children were unaware that ADF education assistance was available to them. The 2019 Defence Families Survey<sup>23</sup> also revealed that awareness of support services like pre-deployment information and Defence Member and Family Support Education sessions was low. The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide reports:

Consistently, we have heard that families feel marginalised and invisible... even though family support is a significant protective factor for the serving or ex-serving member's health and wellbeing. We have heard of the invisibility of children and families.<sup>11 (p86)</sup>

Despite a lack of awareness of services, some supports provided by the ADF act as a protective factor for families.<sup>26</sup> These can include gatherings, such as Unit family

days, pastoral and social work support, funded communication with the member whilst deployed, subsidised housing and a few children's resources, mainly for 8- to 12-year-olds.<sup>26</sup> According to the 2019 Defence Families survey, while approximately half of the families who utilised Defence-affiliated supports found them useful,<sup>23</sup> the overall utilisation of such supports remains low. For example, less than half of the respondents who were aware of a service reported using it, and for most services, usage has been decreasing since 2017. This indicates families might be seeking support from other non-Defence specific sources, or not finding relevant supports meeting their specific needs. To date, the Department of Defence has not reported data on risk and protective factors.<sup>11</sup>

Defence families often provide peer and community support to each other<sup>26</sup> and find support through family, friends and services within the physical and online community, reflecting families' demands for more individual and localised support.<sup>27</sup> Despite this, little is known about Australian Defence parents' perceptions of their young children's social and emotional well-being; understanding of their children's responses to parental deployment and other unique stressors of life within a Defence family; and confidence in supporting their children. We conducted the present study to address this gap.

## 2 | METHODS

### Participants

The inclusion criteria included civilian parents within a Defence family, with children aged 2–8 years. Despite over 200 parents registering for the research study, engagement was lower than expected as parents experienced compounding COVID-19 stressors including lockdowns, retrenchments and home schooling that added to stress and time pressures during data collection period in 2020.

All participating parents ( $N=41$ ) were mothers, with 9.8% ( $n=4$ ) aged between 20 and 29 years; 71% ( $n=29$ ) aged between 30 and 39 years and 19.5% ( $n=8$ ) aged between 40 and 49 years. Participants reported the status of their ADF family member as: 95.1% ( $n=39$ ) currently serving; 2.4% ( $n=1$ ) as currently transitioning and 2.4% ( $n=1$ ) as previously served. In terms of years in a military family, 12.2% ( $n=5$ ) participants reported 2 years, 19.5% ( $n=8$ ) with 5–6 years, 19.5% ( $n=8$ ) with 7–8 years, 7.3% ( $n=3$ ) with 9–10 years, 14.6% ( $n=6$ ) with 11–20 years and 2.4% ( $n=1$ ) with 21–30 years. Just under a quarter of the respondents (24.4%;  $n=10$ ) reported their level of experience in taking care of children at home within a Defence family for 3–4 years (e.g. the age of oldest child was

3–4 years, or this was the number of years they had been parenting within a military family).

Participants were located in all Australian states and territories except Tasmania. Over half of the participants (61%;  $n=25$ ) were from metro regions, 34.2% ( $n=14$ ) from regional and 4.9% ( $n=2$ ) from remote Australia.

### Study design

This mixed-methods study is part of a larger research project Child and Family Resilience Programs (formerly Early Childhood Defence Programs) led by the University of New England in collaboration with researchers from Edith Cowan University and Central Queensland University and was undertaken between May and September 2020.

For the quantitative component of the study, survey questions were co-designed\* by the project research team members and stakeholders, and informed by existing literature on resilience and well-being measures used in paediatric psychological research.<sup>28</sup> The qualitative component included open-ended questions to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the parents' challenges, supports and coping mechanisms within these families.<sup>29</sup>

### Procedure

The study was undertaken with ethics approval from the University of New England Ethics Committee (HE21-027). The research used convenience sampling to recruit civilian parents from the ADF families through media news stories and social media by key project partners. The survey was administered online.

## 3 | RESULTS

### Quantitative data

We used descriptive statistics, such as frequencies in SPSS(v29), to describe the results of parents' perceptions of their children's well-being outcomes, social adjustment, coping mechanisms; their understanding of their children's Defence-related family life (e.g. parental deployment, frequent relocations); their confidence in providing support; and the use of existing resources in supporting their children.

\*A copy of the survey questions is available by contacting the corresponding author.

First, parents were asked to provide an account of their 2- to 8-year-old children's social and emotional well-being. Results, summarised in Table 1, indicated that overall, parents provided a positive evaluation of their children's well-being, with just a quarter of the parents reporting that their children did not cope well on two of the key well-being indicators, such as liking challenges (22%) and willingness to share negative emotions (22%). In the present study, we reported on data for the oldest child only because the pattern of responses was similar to subsequent children (even though the sample sizes were very low).

To further understand children's social adjustment that is evident in military family literature,<sup>7,16</sup> parents were asked to report their level of agreement if rules and routine tend to make their time with their children easier. Overall, 75.6% ( $n = 31$ ) agreed that rules and routine helped most of the time and 24.4% ( $n = 10$ ) reported that rules and routine helped about half the time.

Parents also reported their children's behaviours during periods of parental deployment, household transitions (e.g. parent's training away from home, or parents returning home with injuries, or developing service-related mental health conditions), relocation, or other Defence service-related family stressors. Results,

as summarised in Table 2, found that parents were more likely to report their children losing control of their emotions than demonstrating skills in being able to explain their difficult emotions during periods of deployment or household transitions.

Next, parents provided an account of their understanding of their children's responses to parental deployment and/or frequent relocations or other stressors that may occur in Defence families and their confidence in supporting their children. Results, as shown in Table 3, suggested that a majority of the parents had some understanding of their children's responses to different stressors related to military families (78%); and felt confident in providing emotional support to their children (68%). However, more than half of the parents (61%) were only partially confident in their ability to support their children with parental deployment, household transitions, frequent relocations or other stressors in military families, even with access to existing resources.

Parents further reported on the type of currently available resources they used to support their children through periods of parental deployment and training, frequent relocations, household transitions, and/or other service-related stressors, such as parental service-related physical injuries or mental health conditions (see Table 4).

TABLE 1 Parental perceptions of their children's social and emotional well-being ( $N = 41$ ).

Well-being indicators	Most of the time	About half of the time	Rarely	No response
	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)
Keeps going each day	24 (58.5%)	12 (20.3%)	4 (9.8%)	1 (2.4%)
Keeps interested in things	27 (65.9%)	12 (29.3%)	2 (4.9%)	–
Likes challenges	15 (36.6%)	17 (41.5%)	9 (22%)	–
Strives to reach goals	20 (48.8%)	13 (31.7%)	6 (14.6%)	2 (4.9%)
Adapts easily to new situations	14 (34.1%)	18 (43.9%)	7 (17.1%)	2 (4.9%)
Enjoys being with other people	30 (73.2%)	10 (24.4%)	1 (2.4%)	–
Enjoys being with friends	36 (87.8%)	4 (9.8%)	1 (2.4%)	–
Seeks out activities that make them happy	33 (80.5%)	7 (17.1%)	1 (2.4%)	–
Willing to share their positive emotions with others	27 (65.9%)	9 (22%)	5 (12.2%)	–
Willing to share their negative emotions with others	10 (24.4%)	22 (53.7%)	9 (22%)	–

TABLE 2 Parental perceptions of their children's coping mechanisms ( $N = 41$ ).

	Several times a day	Daily	A few times a week	Sometimes	Rarely	No response
	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)
Lose control of their emotions	7 (17.1%)	12 (29.3%)	14 (34.1%)	5 (12.2%)	2 (4.9%)	1 (2.4%)
Can explain why they are upset	2 (4.9%)	5 (12.2%)	7 (17.1%)	21 (51.2%)	5 (12.2%)	1 (2.4%)

**TABLE 3** Parents' understanding and confidence in supporting their children ( $N=41$ ).

	Strongly agree	Partly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partly disagree	Strongly disagree
Have an understanding of children's responses to parental deployment and/or frequent relocations or other stressors that may occur in Defence families (e.g. PTSD, injuries)	12 (29.3%)	20 (48.8%)	4 (9.8%)	5 (12.2%)	–
Feel confident providing emotional support to my children	6 (14.6%)	22 (53.7%)	3 (7.3%)	10 (24.4%)	–
Feel confident in my ability to help my children cope with parental deployment, family transitions and/or frequent relocations or other stressors that may occur in Defence families (e.g. PTSD, injuries) because of access to quality Australian resources	2 (4.9%)	6 (14.6%)	8 (19.5%)	17 (41.5%)	8 (19.5%)

**TABLE 4** Summary of type of existing resources used by parents to support their children.

Resources	Frequency	%
Children's storybooks (hardcopy)	29	70.7
Children's apps	2	4.8
Children's online programmes	1	2.4
Educational games	6	14.6
Activity books	11	26.8
Other books (that encourage interaction between the parent and child/ren)	1	2.4
Catch-up lessons (that boost children's learning when they have relocated)	1	2.4
Parent online resources	1	2.4
Other	14	34.1

Note:  $N=41$ , however, participants could select more than one type of resources as listed.

## Qualitative data

Within the survey, open-ended questions allowed parents to give detailed information about various aspects of Defence family life and the supports and resources they were using. Deductive thematic analysis<sup>30,31</sup> was used to identify themes related to stresses of Defence family life and resources and supports available for children that are described below.

### Stresses of Defence family life

The study participants (parents) provided rich and detailed descriptions about the way their children struggle with the stresses of Defence family life. Parents reported on the impact of overall military lifestyle stresses, responses to parental absences, challenges understanding

family transitions and struggles with reintegration of the absent parent into the family, and relocation, which is described below:

#### Overall ADF family lifestyle

Parents commented on the effects of Defence family life on their children.

My four-year-old ... struggles with the uncertainty of Defence life. She is ... highly emotional [and] craves structure, routines and consistency.

(Penny)†

It's quite negative.

(Gail)

My children struggle with big changes ... relocation, new school, [and when our] army member is away for extended periods. Their behaviour worsens, their anxiety increases, and meltdowns occur. They become very different children, to the point that due to our constant military challenges, I have given up my medical career to be a full-time support.

(Skye)

#### Children's responses to parental absences

Parents revealed the struggles they perceived their children have experienced due to parental absences for training and deployment. They provided an insight into how their children responded physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively (themes that aligned with information available in the existing literature), and the challenges they face in supporting them. This is demonstrated in the

†Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants.

following quote and further quotes listed in the last column of Table A1 in the appendix.

He has a hard time adjusting and typically will be in a highly emotional state for a week or two after dad leaves. He constantly asks for daddy and has no understanding of where he goes. When he leaves my child becomes overly attached to me in fear of me also leaving. There is also an adjustment when his dad comes home.

(Susy)

#### *Struggles with understanding household transitions*

Some parents reported their children's confusion about the concepts involved in household transitions occurring in the family, often due to their developing understanding of time, which typically develops in the middle years of school.

They don't realise the passage of time, so a week feels ... much longer to them.

(Leah)

My kids don't understand why daddy isn't here ... it's really hard to explain especially when the Defence life is very separate.

(Edwina)

#### *Struggles with reintegration*

Re-adjustment to family life after parental absences can be very difficult for families, especially the children.<sup>17</sup> During parental absence, the family members of the Defence personnel have learned to cope without the absent parent,<sup>32</sup> which means individuals within the family unit have learned coping mechanisms to support them with the changed family context<sup>33</sup> in the absence of the other parent/carer. When the deployed partner is based at home, running the family unit is shared. When the deployed partner is away, the routines, roles and responsibilities need to be revisited in that person's absence. Individuals might have taken on new roles within the family and have a new sense of pride in this role.<sup>34</sup> When the absent parent returns, it can be challenging for them to feel needed and wanted within the family unit. Individuals might resent the returned member's input or assistance.<sup>7</sup>

Having their other parent return and try to fit back into family life is always the hardest part.

(Gail)

They cope- it's [in] the aftermath that is obvious that they have struggled.

(Erica)

She's fussy when he comes home rather than when he leaves.

(Tia)

#### *Struggles with relocation*

Relocation is a major source of stress for Defence families<sup>7,35</sup> and parents in this study reinforced this.

We've moved 7 times in 5 years and I think that it's been easier for the eldest the last 2 times (almost 4 and almost 5), as he has understood a bit better.

(Teagan)

As my children get older it gets harder for them to relocate and stay motivated to make friends.

(Freya)

When my eldest was almost 3 we were living in Sydney. We drove to the Gold Coast ... for Christmas, were home... packing for 2 weeks and then flew to Rockingham to move ... in temporary accommodation for 2 weeks. He was very out of control emotionally, having tantrums and he developed a stutter. We didn't really know how to support him through the stress.

(Teagan)

Our eldest (4) often asks to go back to our last posting location, and often talks about his "old friends"...telling us that he "just really misses them"...we struggle to help him ... he doesn't understand.

(Miranda)

#### **Resources and supports for children and parents**

As displayed in Table 4, parents reported types of resources they most used to support their children were storybooks (70.6%), activity books (26.8%), then educational games (14.6%). In the qualitative data, parents revealed insight into the availability and use of these types of resources, and other supports for children. These included access to age and culturally appropriate resources, general and Defence resources, and strategies promoting protective factors.

*Access to supports*

Previous research revealed a lack of age and culturally appropriate resources and programs for young children from Australian Defence families.<sup>36,37</sup> Parents reported feeling unsupported and alone, and educators were adapting resources designed for older children.<sup>18</sup> In this study, parents reported having little access to effective, age and culturally appropriate resources to support their young children with the stresses of military family life as indicated in these comments.

I have only had access to a book with a teddy bear for my children.

(Freya)

The activity books are mostly a little bit too old for him.

(Sunny)

I haven't found any [resources for] two small children, and I've been crying searching for help.

(Edwina)

This lack of resource impacts parents' confidence in supporting their children.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, one parent who reported feeling confident revealed the unique source of her assurance:

My confidence comes from my own background in social work, particularly having worked with children for 10 years.

*General supports*

Some parents revealed that despite the lack of age and culturally appropriate resources, they found other generic resources to use.

The story books such as 'Under The Love Umbrella', 'The Invisible String', 'Sometimes' and 'Sad' have been very helpful in allowing my child to identify and communicate his feelings around separation.

(Sunny)

We read the book 'My daddy's going away' in the build up to him going away.

(George)

My son found books to be a way of coping with the concept that Daddy was deployed.

(Kyra)

Read relevant books in preparation for deployment helped my daughter be aware [although not completely understanding of] the upcoming deployment.

(Lisa)

*Defence supports*

Some parents reported the Defence Member and Family Support (funded by the Department of Defence) primary school-aged Pepper Penguin books were useful for their child, and another reported newer *Defence Kidz* commercially available books for younger children were useful.

We've got the Pepper Penguin books and my daughter enjoys them and understands the connection with her father's work.

(Tia)

Yes – [the book] breaks the barrier to begin the conversation in an aged appropriate way.

(Tilly)

ADF specific children's books .... Defence Kidz. These are my go-to resources when my children are struggling.

(Erica)

Somewhat helped. They were very basic.

(Felicity)

*Protective factors*

Parents also revealed protective factors such as communication technology, Defence-specific support, community supports and personal strategies that assisted their children to buffer the effects of military family life (see [Table 5](#)).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The present study explored parental perceptions of their young children's social and emotional well-being, and whether parents understand their children's responses to unique stressors of Defence families as well as confidence in supporting their children. We discuss the results of the present study in the following sections as: (i) parental perceptions of their young children's social and emotional well-being and perceived difficulties of parenting; (ii) parental perspectives of adequacy of resources available to help support their children and (iii) recommendations and implications for policy and support. We then identify limitations of the present study and provide directions for future research.

Protective factor	Example
Communication technology	<i>I have focused on giving them adequate emotional support ... while enabling them to “see” my Defence member spouse as regularly as possible (FaceTime) during deployment. I am looking for tools to utilise during our current transition out of Defence. (Smita)</i> <i>Our almost 3yo son understands “Daddy’s away for work.” He likes to watch Daddy’s good morning and goodnight videos sent via mobile phone. (Belinda)</i>
Defence specific support	<i>To cope with transitions, we like to ... utilise the Defence mentor within our new school, but our last location did not have one. (Freya)</i>
Community supports	<i>We like to join sporting clubs... This tends to ... help with the transition. (Freya)</i>
Personal strategies	<i>My oldest ... writes her feelings down and shreds them to help them not take over. (Felicity)</i>

TABLE 5 Family use of protective factors.

## Parental perceptions of their children’s well-being and challenges of parenting

The results of this study align with Australian and international literature in highlighting the range of impacts of military service, particularly concerning deployment and relocation.<sup>38,39</sup> Specifically, our findings suggested that the majority of parents reported their children were doing well on a range of social and emotional well-being indicators, demonstrating resilience, sociability and adaptability to the situations they encountered. This fits with the parental reports of utilising protective factors to buffer the impacts of Defence family life.<sup>26</sup> However, just under a quarter of parents also reported that their children did not cope well on two of the key well-being indicators. Parents also reported children losing control of their emotions and not being able to explain their difficult emotions. The majority of the parents exhibited understanding of their children’s responses to unique stressors related to Defence families, and reported confidence in providing emotional support to their children. However, more than half of the parents were only partially confident in their ability to support their children with parental deployment, household transitions, frequent relocations or other stressors in military families with the available Australian resources. Without the expert training that the participant who was a social worker had undertaken, parents in military families need access to quality resources to build their knowledge, competence and confidence.

## Parental perspectives of access to resources

In supporting children through aspects of military life, access to contextualised, age and culturally appropriate resources are clearly important to these families. The

study identified three significant challenges: (a) awareness of and access to available resources; (b) the need to contextualise suitable resources for their children, and (c) an implicit need for parents to find and contextualise resources for themselves. This third challenge highlights the difficulties for some families relating to unique aspects of military life, including relocation, which takes them into and out of regional, rural and remote communities.

Despite the availability of support programs for military families with children, and the noted importance of educational supports for children, awareness of these supports remains a barrier to access. Awareness of some Defence-specific support services and programs is low.<sup>24</sup> This fact is acknowledged in the present study, where qualitative comments from parents noted that they were unable to find resources to support their children. This points to a gap between the availability and awareness of suitable resources. These challenges would be anticipated to be exacerbated for parents in regional, rural and remote locations where access to other supports is limited.

Even families who do locate available resources can experience challenges relating to suitability. For example, although approximately only half of the participants who accessed Defence supports and services found them useful.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, this sentiment was expressed in the present study, reflected in qualitative comments with parents highlighting that resources were not robust enough to meet the family’s needs, or were targeted at older children. Families took it upon themselves to adapt general community resources such as books on parental absence and look to other types of support including building social connections. Despite the importance of supports also used by members of the general community, participants still valued resources which were contextualised specifically to ADF.

Contextualised resources provide families with advice and support relating to the unique aspects of military life. The distinctive stressors of military life on children as outlined by participants in this study, include a range of physical, social, emotional and cognitive responses to deployment and relocation. Accessing contextualised resources and other community supports may also be challenging for many Defence families who live in regional, rural and remote areas.

It is generally understood that families in regional and remote areas have less access to support and health services than those in metropolitan areas. However, Edward and Baxter's research which explored the impact of geographical isolation on children revealed mixed results.<sup>40</sup> The study found high rates of support service use regardless of geographical area.<sup>40</sup> They noted that support and resource needs are likely exacerbated for Defence families subject to military deployment and relocation cycles, and who, owing to the impacts of relocation, may have reduced community links and awareness of local support services.<sup>40</sup> Parent connectedness to community was an important factor in assessing outcomes for children in the general population.

The transient nature of military service means families may have found suitable resources in another community, but then relocated. This begins a cycle, where families are then not aware of support services and resources in their area and points to a need for resources to be adaptable and not necessarily based in a single location.

The task of finding and re-finding available resources and appropriately contextualising these resources based on individual needs falls onto individual families, frequently the time-poor at-home partner. This task was reflected in participant comments highlighting the work families have undertaken to find resources supporting their families. The present study found that most parents of children from Defence families did not feel confident in supporting their child through the unique stressors of military family life. This finding is unsurprising when considering the challenges outlined above with parents accessing and contextualising suitable resources. This presents a call for resources which are easily accessible, available online and downloadable,<sup>36</sup> so they are available in a range of geographic locations, well contextualised for Australians but readily re-contextualised when necessary. The availability of these resources focuses outside of the individual family unit to educate a wider community of people who support these children such as early childhood educators, school teachers, support workers and community organisations.

## Recommendations and implications for policy and support service delivery

Policy makers should consider two previously published preventive measures to reduce stressors within Defence families. First, alleviate the number of household transitions during the deployment cycle by employing a different model of deployment which involves members completing their training both on the way to, and during deployment without returning home in between.<sup>41</sup> This reduces the Defence personnel's time at the deployment site, reducing transferable operational stress. Second, reduce the number of relocations for families with children 3 to <18 years of age, so ideally, a child would only experience a move every 6 years.<sup>18</sup> This allows children to build their sense of identity and belonging, and have a chance to flourish in educational settings.<sup>22</sup>

Those designing models of care to support military families need to consider the mobility of military families and inherent household transition fatigue. Finding appropriate healthcare and support services in new locations is frustrating, so the availability to stay connected with previous health providers through telehealth for the majority of their care could be advantageous.

## 5 | LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The present results should be interpreted in the light of some of the study limitations. First, a small sample size limits generalisation of our findings to a broader group of Defence families. Second, a broader geographical sample, including families from Tasmania might highlight specific needs and resource gaps. Third, the present study focussed on parental perspectives of young children. Future research could broaden age parameters to provide a more holistic view of the resources available to older children and teenagers. Last, we could not compare the findings with a similar civilian parent cohort in Australia due to unavailability of such data. Future research could use a longitudinal study design to record both civilian and Defence family parents' perceptions of their children well-being outcomes and perceived challenges and difficulties of parenting young children in both civilian and military families. This will help track developmental trajectories of children's well-being and coping and inform targeted supports and resources. Research into a broader age and geographical range to provide a national snapshot of the difficulties facing Defence families, especially in non-metropolitan areas is also warranted. Additionally, further examination of how children's emotional responses

during family transitions differ between relocations, parental deployment and/or training or other Defence family stressors could provide nuanced understanding of experiences of stressors related to military life.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

In a first-of-its kind study conducted in Australia, we found that Defence parents reported their young children were coping on most of the key well-being indicators. They also indicated they were only partially confident in supporting their child through the unique stressors of Defence families. This presents a need for access to free, quality, online, research-based and age and culturally specific Australian resources to support young children. This is especially important for families in regional, rural and remote locations, who are less able to access mental health and other specialist supports. As a society, we need to better support Defence families with young children due to their increased exposure to stress and trauma.<sup>37</sup> As one parent from this study stated:

The lack of help or resources is maddening. The Navy and Defence force wasn't created yesterday. Thousands of kids and parents have had to deal with what I'm dealing with yet no help is available.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Marg Rogers:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; supervision; validation; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Amy Johnson:** Conceptualization; project administration; resources; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Yumiko Coffey:** Data curation; methodology; project administration; resources; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Jill Fielding:** Resources; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Ingrid Harrington:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Navjot Bhullar:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; methodology; resources; software; supervision; validation; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors do not profit from the research project, so there are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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## APPENDIX

**TABLE A1** Parental account of their children's responses to parental absences.

Category of response	Symptoms	Parental account of their children's responses to parental absences (e.g. deployment and training)
Physical <sup>14</sup>	Disturbed sleep (nightmares, unable to self-settle, taking longer to fall asleep) Regressions in feeding and toileting	<i>When my husband has to leave for training for months at a time...my son...loses his appetite, cries easily and whines constantly. (Penny)</i>
Social <sup>16</sup>	Struggles with routines Reduced ability to cope normal with peers and family members Clingy behaviour with adults, isolating themselves from peers	<i>Breaks within the time away (a weekend visit home) can be challenging when they end. (Belinda)</i> <i>With having dad away a lot they are reluctant to do homework. (Freya)</i> <i>The oldest gets upset ... her teacher will mention that she cried in class when her reader mentioned a "Dad". (Bobby)</i>
Emotional <sup>15</sup>	Increase in tears, anger and emotional outbursts Withdraws emotionally to avoid further hurt Separation Anxiety	<i>She remains highly emotional and at times angry throughout deployments. (Ali)</i> <i>After saying goodbye, my son becomes angry, withdrawn, argumentative and frustrated. (Penny)</i> <i>A roller coaster of emotions, some days are better than others! (Frances)</i> <i>She was very keen to talk to her dad for the first 4 months of his deployment, then ... she became more disinterested in talking to him. (Wren)</i> <i>They struggle when dad is away. That became more apparent after he returned. They were scared he would leave again. (Erica)</i>
Cognitive <sup>7</sup>	Regression in previous skills Reduced concentration, restricting their ability to learn	<i>Their confidence is negatively impacted due to the decreased stability in home life. (Sam)</i> <i>My 8-year-old is lost without his dad. He is sad, disinterested in activities, disinterested in school work. (Sara)</i> <i>Their grades and interest in school is declining. (Nia)</i>