

## RESEARCH

# Strengthening and supporting parent–child relationships through digital technology: Benefits and challenges

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**Abstract**

**Objective:** This paper explores Australian military families' use of social media and digital communication to maintain and strengthen parent–child relationships during military deployments.

**Background:** The physical and emotional well-being of children and partners of military serving members is affected by service. Maintaining positive family relationships between military members and their children during periods of absence (including deployment) is important for parental relationships as well as the well-being of the child.

**Method:** A qualitative meta-analysis is used to collate data from two previous studies of Australian Defence Force (ADF) families with children, in order to generate a new data set from which novel insights were drawn.

**Results:** Families show a preference for social media and digital communication methods, and digital technologies affordances and practicalities are well suited for Defence families with children. There are a range of benefits; digital technologies are used to strengthen relationships between children and their deployed parent. The study highlights a range of challenges for deployed parents as well as points to the work required from the at-home parent in facilitating these connections.

**Conclusion:** Maintaining positive family relationships between military members and their children during times of absences is important for both relationships. This paper explores how ADF families use social and digital communication during military absences and outlines the role

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these technologies play as a medium for strengthening familial relationship.

#### Implications.

The findings of this paper highlight the importance of digital and social communication technologies for supporting families during absences. This has implications for the ADF, who might look to reduce members' access to such communication for security concerns. Reduced family well-being may also have impacts on retention, a key issue for military organizations. Accordingly, the findings of this paper may be used to inform decisions about restricting internet and social media access for deployed military members.

#### KEYWORDS

digital, parenting, children, deployment, military family, parenting, qualitative research

## INTRODUCTION

Military families with young children (2–5 years of age) face many challenges as a direct result of their association with the armed services. Transitions and parental absence from the home are a key feature of military family life with resulting impacts on the entire family (Brooks, 2011; Rogers, 2017; Siebler, 2009). Social and digital media tools have stepped in to play an important role in facilitating the relationship between military members and their children. This communication can enhance the relationship between the absent military member and their family but also provides unique challenges.

This paper reports the findings of an Australia study that demonstrated both the advantages and the challenges of digital communication technologies in providing Australian Defence families with ongoing communication during military-related parental absences. In this work the researchers explore the affordances and practicalities of social media supports and the benefits and challenges of video calls, emails, and messaging. The researchers highlight how the unpaid and greatly unrecognized labor of at-home, civilian parents is required to facilitate these engagements.

Literature from the United States of America, United Kingdom, and Australia conclusively finds that military life inherently places significant pressure on families (Fivek, 2017; Karney & Crown, 2007). Military service impacts all facets of family life (Borah & Fina, 2017). A significant amount of pressure comes from the deployment cycle, which research has defined into four stages—predeployment, deployment (or other absences), reunion, and reintegration, each with its unique stressors (Gewirtz et al., 2011). In addition, relocations and military posting cycles influence the family profoundly. Military partners are required to navigate their unique lives without consistent support from their partner or extended family networks (Rogers-Baber, 2017). Additionally, relocations can mean losing friends who offer practical and emotional support, and the need to navigate a new community (Rogers, 2020). This means finding services, support, and establishing a sense of belonging before being moved again, normally within a 2-year period. This can become an exhausting cycle for families (Rogers, 2017).

Uncertainty is a significant challenge facing military families. This includes not only the impact of frequent and sometimes unexpected absences from home but also changes to policy and inconsistent support services leading to family instability (Foreman, 2001). Families and military organizations have been described as “greedy institutions,” as both demand a great deal

of sacrifice, time, energy, and devotion from their members (De Angelis & Segal, 2015). When these institutions intersect, inevitable tensions are created, and it is within these intersections that military families live their lives (Segal, 1986).

For young children, these frequent household transitions due to deployment, training, and relocations can be very difficult to understand (Rogers, 2018). Young children are still developing a sense of self that is unique from the parents. Additionally, the concept of time is challenging, only fully developing in primary (elementary) school years because it involves understanding both measurement and space (Bobis et al., 2013; Sperry Smith, 2006). Young children often understand time as yesterday, today, or tomorrow, rather than in weeks or months when their parent might return home (Rogers, 2017). Also, younger children are present oriented, causing greater challenges in their understanding of time (RSA, 2010).

Parental deployment can have a significant impact on children as they respond to their parent being away from home. As depicted in Table 1, children can respond physically (Lester & Flake, 2013), emotionally (Tomforde, 2015), socially (Hollingsworth, 2011), and cognitively (Chandra et al., 2010). They also experience the responses of their siblings and at-home parent, sometimes intensifying the responses (Rogers, 2017). These responses can be both helped and hindered by the narratives, rituals, and acculturation they experience within their often tight-knit military community (Baber, 2016; Rogers, 2018). Encouragingly, there are many protective factors that assist young children in most families, including family, peers, community, educators, and those supports provided by the Australian Defence Force (ADF; Rogers-Baber, 2017).

One of the protective factors offered by families and the ADF is access to digital communication technology that can assist children to communicate with their absent parent (Rogers, 2017). Most children in developed nations are immersed in the digital world (Marsh et al., 2018). They are provided technology in early childhood education services and during family time, including interaction with tablets and iPads which become embedded into family relationships (Chaudron, 2015; Harrison & McTavish, 2018). These can contribute to children's understandings of family narratives and systems (Rogers et al., 2019). Digital technologies are also part of children's social worlds and can assist their understanding of their culture (Arnott, 2016). The use of digital communication technology within military families can assist children and parents' relationships as they communicate on a regular basis (Rogers & Bird, 2020). A significant number of U.S. military families now use communication technology in some form to maintain connection during deployments (McClure et al., 2018), and military members have begun demanding greater access to digital communication tools during deployment from at least 2004 (Schumm et al., 2004). This can assist with the reestablishment of family relations at the time of reunions and reintegrations during the deployment cycle. Digital

**TABLE 1** Children's potential responses to parental deployment and training episodes.

Categories of responses	Potential responses
Physical	Regressions in toileting and feeding, sleep disturbances (e.g., nightmares, night terrors, trouble sleeping independently and falling to sleep).
Emotional	Increased emotional outbursts, tears, tantrums, anger outbursts, withdrawing emotionally to avoid hurt
Social	Increased clingy behavior, seeking extra adult attention rather than time with peers, inability to cope with routines, reduced ability to cope with normal frustrations when playing with siblings and peers
Cognitive	Difficulty concentrating which affects learning, skill regression

communication technology can also assist young children's understanding of parental deployment (Rogers & Bird, 2020).

Communication is an important coping mechanism for families, as well as being key to enhancing family resiliency (Maguire, 2015). Access to reliable communication is considered by some as vital for family members, because effective communication impacts relationships both during and after deployment (Andres et al., 2015). Communication is an essential tool for military families, allowing connections with the military member, family, and friends (Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). With this in mind, previous literature is inconsistent in reporting the benefits of communication during deployments (Knobloch et al., 2018), with some military partners reporting more frequent contact had a negative impact on their relationship (Joseph & Afifi, 2010) whereas others found increased contact reduced relationship distress (Cigrang et al., 2014).

Literature tends to focus more specifically on the interactions between adult family members (Carter & Renshaw, 2016; Ponder & Aguirre, 2012) rather than taking a specific view of interactions between the deployed parent and children. Studies that do examine communication between children and deployed parents (see Blasko & Murphy, 2016; Houston et al., 2013; MacDermid et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2014) is predominately based on U.S. research. Although insights from U.S.-based research are helpful, factors unique to the ADF lead to a call for research findings that explicitly explore experiences in an Australian context. These factors include vast geographical distances, unique civil–military culture, and the placement of significant number of military families in remote and regional areas.

One study of communication between children and their deployed military parent applied a coparenting framework (DeVoe et al., 2020). They found the framework, which emerged predominately from research on divorced or absent families, was useful for understanding the experiences military families encounter as a result of service life, including challenges during planning, separations, reunion, and reintegration (DeVoe et al., 2020). The study identified the role of the home parent in facilitating this member–child relationship as a key theme (DeVoe et al., 2020), however it stopped short of exploring the labor aspects of this on the at-home parent.

The work of using digital platforms to facilitate connections between the deployed parent and their child represents significant emotional and actual labor by the civilian, at-home parent. It is a recognized limitation of digital technology for facilitating parent–child communication that it cannot be self-initiated by young children; the involvement of a caregiving adult is required (McClure et al., 2018). McClure et al. (2018) discussed this experience in a child-centered approach and pointed out it's beneficial for the caregiver to be able to hear both sides of the conversation, participate, and support; but they did not address how this requires the effort of the at-home parent other than to point out how stress between the absent parent and the caregiver may impact their ability to successfully facilitate this connection.

## Research context

The ADF population includes nearly 60,000 personnel across three services, the Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well as another 34,000 ADF reserve members and Australian Public Service employees (Australian Government Defence, 2019). The 2019 Defence Census reports 66% of permanent ADF personnel had a spouse or partner ( $n = 38,798$ ) and slightly under two in five had dependent children (Australian Government Defence, 2019). In an Australian context, a dependent child is a child of the member, or an adopted child under 21 years of age, who continues to live with the member (Australian Government Defence, n.d.). These numbers are given to indicate the number of Australian families with children impacted by military service.

The Australian military is involved in a range of domestic and global operations that require the member's absence away from home. In the 2019–2020 year, 22% of permanent ADF

members were deployed, with the Navy personnel most likely to be deployed (35%). The 2019 Defence Census reports 32% of permanent personnel had experienced a deployment of between 6–8 months in the previous year. Outside of deployments, 84% of ADF personnel spent at least one night away from home. The median number of nights was 33 nights, with the Army most likely to spend nights away (45 nights; Australian Government Defence, 2019). This is expected to increase in response to heightened global insecurity (Australian Government Defence, 2016).

The ADF has acknowledged the importance of access to internet and digital communications through the rollout of Quality of Life Wi-Fi access (McHugh, 2021). Quality of Life Wi-Fi, formally the Cobra Satellite Communications System in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), gives deployed members reliable, stable, and consistent internet access, which they can connect to with a personal device. RAN members said they use the Quality of Life Wi-Fi access for communicating with family members at home (McHugh, 2021).

As economic pressure increases, retaining enlisted members is a critical issue for modern militaries in an effort to be seen as an “employer of choice”; a preferred employer in a competitive market (Du et al., 2017). Family satisfaction is a key factor in service retention (Jessup, 2000; Segal & Segal, 2003), and as such, military organizations are obliged to acknowledge their responsibilities to families, who have significant influence over the member’s ongoing enlistment (Moelker & Van Der Kloet, 2003). When members leave the military, they are most likely to cite family reasons for leaving (Siebler, 2009; Thomas & Bell, 2007), and the important role of family has been continually acknowledged throughout Australia’s Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022).

Indeed, supporting families is perceived as a method to improve “morale, readiness and retention” and maintain a strong force who are focused on the mission (Andres et al., 2015, p. 322). Losing military members, who are often highly trained, is very expensive for military organizations. Militaries have thus transitioned from perceiving families as nonessential and denying their obligation to families (Jessup, 2000) to actively perceiving families as direct stakeholders with significant influence. This profound shift is seen in the ADF through enhanced services for families and more direct communication from ADF command to families (Australian Government Defence, 2021). As the ADF looks to retain families, addressing challenges and reducing the negative impacts of military service on dependent children will become increasingly important. Understanding the communication needs of families will play a key role in this.

## Research questions

Having identified a lack of specific awareness around the use of digital technologies by Australian military families, this study sought to understand the following research questions:

- In what ways do Australian military families with children use digital communication technologies to facilitate connections during deployments and absences from home?
- What are the implications for Australian military families with children relating to the use of digital communication technologies during deployments and absences from home?

## METHOD

This study applied a qualitative meta-analysis, using data from two previous studies (Johnson, 2018; Rogers, 2017) to generate a new data set from which novel insights were drawn.

Qualitative meta-analysis describes the secondary qualitative analysis of primary qualitative findings (Timulak, 2009). Finfgeld (2003) summarized this method as “a new and integrative

interpretation of findings that is more substantive than those resulting from individual investigations” (p. 894). This method is similar to the more well-known quantitative meta-analysis method in that the function is to aggregate findings and identify patterns across primary studies (Levitt, 2018). Studies are selected for inclusion based on their “fit” to the meta-analytic question and the quality of the study (Levitt, 2018).

Two original studies were selected for inclusion in the meta-analysis as outlined in Table 2. The studies were selected on the basis that they were PhD studies of Australian military communities, and the full original data sets were available for access. This offsets one identified limitation of qualitative meta-analysis, which is a loss of sensitivity to the original research context (Paterson et al., 2001) as secondary researchers lack access to the originating data set.

In both previous studies, researchers explored digital communication technologies as part of the overall projects, although Study 1 focused on social media supports used by parents, whereas Study 2 focused on the way children experience and understand parental deployment within a military family, which included digital communication. Both studies explored the use of digital communication technology as a tool for relationship building and maintenance during training and deployment.

## Participants

Both studies required participants to be partners of current serving or recently discharged ADF members (see Table 2). Whereas Study 2 sought to explicitly recruit families with children as

**TABLE 2** A summary of the two studies.

	Study 1	Study 2
Study name	Inside and outside: An investigation of social media use by Australian Defence Force partners	Young children’s understandings and experiences of parental deployment within an Australian Defence Force (ADF) family
Type of study	PhD	PhD
Methodology	Social media ethnography	Qualitative mosaic approach (participatory) and narrative approach
Ethics	Ethical elements were approved by the Defence People Research-Low Risk Ethics Panel and the Central Queensland University Human Research Ethics Committee.	Ethics were approved by the University of New England Human Research Ethics Panel. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.
Data collection tools	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	Storybook elicitation for chats, artwork, discussions, craft, role-play, puppet play, rhymes and raps; sharing of family photos; children taking photos; informal discussions with civilian parents and educators; observations; researcher journal
Analysis	Thematic	Thematic and narrative with a sociocultural lens applied
Participants	35 civilian partners of current Australian military members from the Navy, Army, and Air Force	2–5-year-old children from current and recently serving Australian Army families as well as civilian parents and early childhood educators
Demographics	Participants represented five geographical states and territories	Families represented four military bases and were located in three geographical states
Researcher lenses	Insider researcher (as partner of ADF member)	External researcher



well as directly engage with children themselves, Study 1 was inclusive of families with and without children (however, most identified they were parenting during interviews and focus groups). Data from 13 participants in the previous studies were specifically drawn for inclusion in this qualitative meta-analysis. These participants were all adult female civilian partners of current-serving members with children. Participants were partnered with members from the Royal Australian Navy or the Australian Army and represent a range of rank levels, from junior enlisted to senior officers. The data from the two studies were combined and thematically analyzed as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis identified several key themes, including affordances and practicalities of social media for facilitating parent–child relationships during military absences, as well as the benefits and challenges of same.

## RESULTS

### Social media: Affordances and practicalities

Australian military families use social media as a tool for facilitating the relationship between the child and the absent parent during deployment. Facebook was seen as a useful tool. Facebook's affordances allowed families to address practicalities that prevented them from communicating via other formats. Comments from participants also demonstrate the work families undertake to enable communication between the deployed member and their family as they seek solutions that overcome communication barriers.

Participants said the Australian Defence Force's email server restricted them from sending photos over 1 MB. This resulted in photos of low quality or being unable to be delivered, as one participant noted when recollecting her experience of sharing her daughter's birthday photos:

It was my daughter's birthday last week so I tried to send a photo via e-mail, and it came back because the file was too big for one photo. (Hannah, Navy partner)

This participant went on to say how their family preferred Facebook, as it allowed them to share multiple images:

Whereas with Facebook I can send hundreds, tag him in things, and he can do the same. (Hannah, Navy partner)

Facebook's ability to easily share multiple files was noted by multiple participants as a key advantage, especially for military members who are unable to access the internet on a regular basis—such as submariner families. One participant whose husband worked on a submarine shared how they often had limited communication with the deployed member, especially because phoning home required the member to buy a SIM card in the country they were visiting. Access to internet was easier, and allowed for more communication opportunities:

He's not going [to] buy a phone sim card, because they don't know exactly where they're going until the last minute, so having the Facebook messenger he wrote, I'm alive, I love you, I miss you, and to me, that was worth gold. If he didn't have that, I wouldn't have heard from him the entire time. We have special need kids, and they struggled. (Jessica, Navy partner).

Along with direct communication, families said they used social media for tagging the ADF member in posts that are also shared.

I tag him in on everything, so when he does [get online], it bombards him. “There’s the kids, and that’s their carnival day, and one of our kids got a ribbon.” (Jessica, Navy partner)

When they are away, you tag him in all the kids photos, and if they do by miracle get onto Facebook, they can see all of the kids photos. (Jade, Navy partner)

Doing this allowed the absent parent to mention these events in calls home to the family, or when the deployment ends and the family reunites.

He comes back, and he’s like, “Hey mate, I saw [the child’s special event],” and he can be able to interact with the kids, with them knowing that he knows what happened while they are away. (Jessica, Navy partner)

In addition to facilitating direct connections between the at-home and deployed family members, participants identified social media as a useful tool for receiving information from other sources about the activities of the deployed parent. Families used this information to help explain the deployed parent’s job activities to the child:

Some brigades have a Facebook page. I think it’s really great that I can show the kids there’s a picture of Dad, doing this, the kids love seeing him doing stuff, in vehicles, holding weapons, whatever, the kids love seeing him, that’s so awesome, so I love that they do that. (Nadine, Army partner)

Although families enjoyed the benefits afforded to them by Facebook, most participants said they were cognizant of operational and personal security requirements and acted accordingly to protect private information. For some participants, this meant not sharing sensitive images about their children (such as those that would identify which school they attend). For other families, their use of Facebook was primarily restricted to a private family group or chat:

We’ve set up a private page that’s just him and I, so I can put pictures of the kids, and he can put pictures up of him, and what he’s doing. (Georgia, Navy partner)

For one participant, her partner had not previously held social media accounts due to security concerns. The ability to connect to family, and increased access to Quality of Life Wi-Fi on ships and deployments led to the member accessing Facebook for the first time:

He’s gone on deployment, and is away for a while. E-mails have been up and down. The ship now has WiFi, so he can actually get on Facebook, whereas before, he can’t see it, there’s no point in having it. (Georgia, Navy partner)



One participant who had lost her military member in a battle commented on the support she received in an informal Facebook group:

I am close to other war widows in our Facebook group. They have been a great support and know what it is like.... How would a counsellor know what I was going through? They have not experienced the death of a husband and the father of their child. I just talk to my Facebook group. (Wendy, Army partner)

Another instance from Study 2 demonstrated the usefulness of Facebook for support. One participant commented that the most difficult time during her partner's 5 month deployment was during the 3rd week. During that week, she would post on Facebook that she was not coping, and her friends would send messages to comfort her and drop off meals and flowers if they were close by. She said,

My Facebook friends are great. That helps me. Troy has been in-country for a while so communication has been less frequent, but he will be back online everyday again soon. (Lara, Army partner)

### **Video calls, emails, and messages: Benefits and challenges**

Study 2 identified varied use of digital communication technology. It varied in both frequency and type, due to the age of the children and parents, the needs of family members, and the availability of internet and technologies. Children shared different ways they communicated with the absent parent. All parents reported these technologies supported the family and their reunions and reintegrations. They also communicated frustrations with technical difficulties or relationship communication challenges they experienced. Similar to thematic comments relating to affordances and practicalities, participants here give insight into the work it takes to manage digital connections between deployed parents and their children.

Digital communication was described as a useful mediating tool during deployment and training episodes, and each family utilized different methods to deal with situations as they arose during the deployment cycle. One partner commented,

Skype was a regular event for Jack though. He loved it. You know it has made all the difference for him. Once we met up in Singapore a few months ago when Paul had leave for a few days, he saw Dad at the airport and just ran straight towards him, calling "Daddy, Daddy." It was like the man on the TV come to life. There was no stand-off-ishness at all. It was fabulous. I think that was the turning point for Jack. He seemed to cope with it so much better. It was like he knew he could see Paul on the TV and then he would come back home. (Leanne, Army partner)

Another said,

We did Facetime most days and we used messaging. She loved dancing around on the videos and talking to him on the phone. Sometimes she would just pretend to talk to him when she was playing at home. Davin makes little videos when he knows he can't use Facetime for a few days. She is hilarious as she thinks it is live

and answers back. We send him pictures she has drawn. Our baby Oscar loves hearing his voice and moves toward the screen and smiles. He is OK with Davin and doesn't show any "stranger danger" signs which I think is helped by Facetime. (Wendy, Army partner)

Frequency of calls and time zone differences caused problems for young children and parents who struggled to communicate effectively when the children were overtired toward the end of the day. Although the time didn't suit them, it was when the deployed member was available during their lunch break. This was reflected in one participants' comment:

He was able to use Skype most days. He said he found that really helpful being able to see us every day and know we were OK. I found it very draining. Phone calls were better as I could be on speaker-phone and I could keep attending to the children and do housework while we chat. Skype sessions every night meant you had to be totally available for an hour at a really bad time of night. The kids and I were both tired, the kids were whiny and sometimes it was the last thing you felt like doing. I did it anyway and of course would never tell him how much I hated it. (Fiona, Army partner)

For other families, video calls were less frequent making them special occurrences.

Skype and phone calls helped. Sundays were special Skype days once a fortnight normally. There were no mobile phones or texts. Seb left his phone at home. We emailed each other every day. Sometimes Brian would say "Tell dad this" or "Show dad that" and I would scribe for him. The kids fought at times over time on the phone with Seb. Davina would stay on the phone for a long time just listening to Daddy's voice and trying to talk and Brian would get very cross when he had to wait (Brenda, Army partner)

We just email each other back and forth, and I scan the children's drawings. Phone calls are once a week, and that is enough. (Penny, Army partner)

Parents also shared the challenges of digital communication and how it created problems for their family. Some parents experienced tensions both during and after deployment when both sides had to soften the news, downplay difficulties both were facing, and know the level of detail to include in their communication, as described by Bartone (2015). One participant captured this in her comment about their experiences with communication when her spouse was deployed.

Before he deployed there was a family information session defence put on where they said not to bother your partner with things that can be solved by yourself or with support at home. They also said to avoid telling them things that might play on their mind and affect them on duty. That made it really hard. Jess (daughter) was really sick and we were in and out of hospital and medical visits and testing a lot for many months and I couldn't mention it except to downplay the seriousness of it. Caleb's Aunt also got really ill and I couldn't mention that either. It was weird when he come back as we had lots of conversations where I had to explain to him

what really happened. That was hard as he felt he was lied to. (Fiona, Army partner)

Other parents were minimizing inevitable stress that spreads between work and family life (Andres et al., 2015) and were often instructed by the ADF to do so, as one participant explained:

I was not told to hold back any information from Seb, but I felt guilty if I told him how bad things were at home and how hard I was finding it. There was a period of about 2 months when the children were continually sick between the two of them and I was really struggling with very little sleep. After it was over I told him. Then he was really upset I had held that back from him and he felt really guilty I had gone through that by myself. (Brenda, Army partner)

Parenting during video calls was also a source of contention for one family:

He thinks he is helping me when he tries to parent over Skype. How do you effectively parent from another continent? (Lara, Army partner)

Interestingly, the use of shared illicit mobile devices to notify loved ones they were safe when communication was banned was viewed affectionately by one family at home due to the particular effort and risks involved. A participant commented that she would not have any more video calls once her partner was traveling home:

Nothing now 'till he is back, not even emails after last night. We had a few texts for a while [smiling wryly], but he said not to ask any questions. (Leanne, Army partner)

The usefulness and stress associated with video calls was mentioned by another participant with young children:

We also use things like Facetime and Skype a lot so we can make a connection with the kids. They don't really get phone calls, it just doesn't make sense to them. Like we've worked out we can skype and facetime and read storybooks to them wherever he is and that works really well. Well, at least it keeps them in front of the screen. The poor guy would call up and they'd just wander off on him, and he'd feel rather rejected, so this way he's got that connection with his kids. (Alexa, Navy partner)

## DISCUSSION

Digital technology offers a range of benefits for military families during deployment (Rogers, 2017). Digital technology was perceived as particularly beneficial for keeping family members connected during times of absence (Rogers, 2020). Sinanan (2021), discussing Fly-In-Fly-Out mining workers, explained the physical distance between parents and their children due to work impacts on family life, both when they are together and when they are apart. Indeed,

intimacy and everyday transactions, interactions, and caregiving are more difficult to sustain. However, Sinanan (2021) believed the use of digital media by such families enables intimate relationships and communities and can sustain emotional landscapes. The extent to which they are sustained varies between families and relationships within families as demonstrated in the data from the two studies. For some families, frequent contact was useful to support the relationships but for others it created new tensions and challenges to navigate, such as coparenting.

The use of social media and digital communications technology can also be a protective factor for families when they are separated by military deployment and training. Protective factors provide a buffer for children and families in times of stress (Bromfield et al., 2014). This buffer is created through facilitating close family relationships while the family is apart, facilitating easier transitions when the family reunites. Additionally, such platforms can address the loneliness that often affects parents who work away (Wilson et al., 2014), thereby improving employee well-being. Moreover, Defence members report being able to focus at work if they know their family are well and contactable (Rogers, 2017).

Key affordances of platforms, including the ability to send multiple large video files, was preferred over more restricted formats such as email, where file sizes restricted the amount and type of content able to be shared. In this, affordances reduced the labor of the at-home parent in generating and sending this content, as they were able to “tag” the absent deployed parent in content that was already uploaded online. Prerecorded videos were able to be sent when the deployed parent was online and then accessed at leisure, meaning the family could continue to connect outside of synchronous meetings. Children tended to be keen to participate and utilized the technology to engage in pretend play. They also kept the absent parent present in their day-to-day life, which could enhance relationships and ease challenges associated with reintegration (Rogers, 2020).

These findings are generally aligned with international (predominately U.S.-based) research that identifies digital technology tools play a key role in coparenting relationships during deployment (DeVoe et al., 2020); however, they also highlights gaps, such as the labor outputs required by the at-home parent to facilitate such connections.

Challenges were also present in the use of digital technology during parental absences (Rogers, 2017). Successful use of digital technology required “work” on behalf of both the deployed parent and their at-home partner. For the deployed or absent parent, they were required to manage time zone differences and access to stable internet connections. There were also operational and personal security considerations, including potential consequences for breaking the rules about this. Cybersecurity concerns were also held by the at-home family, who are keenly aware of security protocols and feel a deep sense of obligation to protect the well-being of the member (Johnson, 2020). Efforts by the deployed parent to “parent” over digital devices were seen as ineffectual at best, and at worst, resented by the at-home parent, leading to relationship frustrations.

The work of using digital platforms to facilitate connections between the deployed parent and their child represents significant emotional and actual labor by the civilian, at-home parent. Participants in this research mentioned frustrations around managing the child’s enthusiasm and engagement for synchronous connections and the availability of time for phone calls, especially when time zone differences presented challenges. Another aspect of this is the work of the at-home parent in deciding how much information to disclose, and what information to withhold from the deployed parent, being cognizant of the deployed parent’s stress levels. This “digital parenting” represents the work of parents, particularly mothers, in managing and facilitating younger children’s access to digital technology based on their own digital competence (Rahayu & Haningsih, 2021). Existing work in this space tends to focus on parents’ efforts to balance developmental and social benefits to children over perceived risks (Jeffery, 2021), though here the definition is expanded to consider aspects of a “digital housewife” (see Jarrett, 2016).

Requiring unpaid and greatly unrecognized labor of at-home parents to facilitate parent–child communication through deployments contributes to the “idealized military wife” archetype

(Gray, 2017; Johnson et al., 2022; Ware, 2012); a traditionally female person who supports the military member without hesitation or consideration of the cost to her own needs and in doing so provides critical unpaid support to the military institution (Archer et al., 2021). This speaks to the

degree of acculturation and the ADF's success in enlisting the support of spouses, who were modern career women and their children. They were in effect enlisted, providing unpaid hours of work for Defence, and they were resigned to the demands of relocations, deployment, unplanned spousal absences and other difficulties associated with military life. (Rogers, 2017, p. 435)

Overall, the benefits and challenges the families in this study experienced are summarized in Table 3.

## Limitations

There are a number of limitations affecting the ability for the results to be generalized. The study discusses data collected within particular time frames in specific contexts that have implications. For example, policies within the Defence force change, and so too do social media

**TABLE 3** Benefits and challenges using digital communications technology during deployment and training.

Benefits	Challenges
Keeping family members informed and involved	Parenting over Skype was resented and viewed as ineffectual by the nondeployed parent Tensions existed with how much information to share with the deployed parent to avoid increasing their stress levels while deployed
Free access to Skype for the deployed parent and free postage for care packages sent from home	Deployed parent having to line up to access selected technologies Time zone differences causing a range of difficulties for young children and nondeployed parents
Keeps the deployed parent present in the child's mind	Deployed parent wanting more contact than the nondeployed parent due to anxiety thus placed further demands on nondeployed parent's limited available time
Children were sometimes very keen to engage and a few utilized this form of communication in their pretend play about the family	Sometimes young children struggled to engage online when they were overtired or lacked sustained concentration
The ability to prerecord videos and send them from training locations meant the family could enjoy regular communications when the deployed parent was out of range	Confusion and frustration when the child did not understand the difference between prerecorded videos and real-time video calls (e.g., FaceTime) and tried to communicate unsuccessfully with the recording
Availability and access during deployment and training	Limited access at times in certain locations and during strategic times on deployment. Nondeployed parent's frustrations and fears when there was no access, especially during a dangerous mission or a strategic time, such as the withdrawal of units to travel home
Use of illicit, shared mobile devices, which were not allowed, to send messages home	Possible consequences for breaking rules and security dilemmas it may cause

Note. From Rogers (2017).

platforms and digital communication software. Additionally, military families from other countries might be subject to different policies and practices regarding access. Despite this, there are many implications for the practical use of these findings.

## Implications

This paper raises many areas of interest that are worthy of further study, including access and challenges with access to digital communication technology to connect with their families. For example, how does access to Wi-Fi on naval vessels impact a member's quality of life, and indeed their families? Similarly, another area of importance is how the military's efforts to curb or reduce members' use of social media (citing security concerns) impacts the quantity or quality of their communication with their families. There is need for further studies exploring the types and effectiveness of resources and programs that aim to improve Defence parents' skills, knowledge, and confidence in utilizing digital communication technology to build resilient families (Rogers et al., 2021).

The results of this study also have implications for retention of members and their families. Retention issues in the military appear to be a social problem, of which family support issues play a role (Huddleston, 2020). Military organizations, including the ADF, are seeking ways to support members and their families. Attrition of ADF personnel is expensive because they are highly trained, and it has an ongoing affect as some families are multigenerational military families. Because many personnel who leave the forces cite family reasons, the implications of this study suggest it would be worthwhile for the ADF to explore avenues to improve families' experiences and access to social media and digital communication technology supports in an effort to build resilient Defence families. This type of support will be more effective if policymakers learn from the experiences of Defence families such as those in this paper. Practically, military organizations might recognize the importance of allowing access to digital communication and social media to families when they are separated.

The implications of these findings are also important for military families internationally because military family members generally experience time apart that might be supported by the use of digital communication technology. However, it is important to note that although this paper demonstrates the transforming nature of digital communication to enhance family life, it might not work for military families in other countries who might have different security regulations and different arrangements for working away.

Additionally, the findings have implications for other remote workers in industries such as emergency services, transport, agriculture, mining, and other natural resources. Also, families can be separated for medical reasons, or due to incarceration, although access to communication might be different in these contexts, and the absent parent might have further challenges to keep their relationship growing.

## Conclusion

The physical and emotional well-being of children and partners of military serving members is affected by service. Maintaining positive family relationships between military members and their children during periods of absence (including deployment) is important for parental relationships as well as the well-being of the child. Families show a preference for social media and digital communication methods. This meta-analysis draws new insights from two studies of Australian Defence Force families with children and explores how families use social media and digital communication to maintain and strengthen parent–child relationships during parental military deployment. It outlines the transforming nature of digital communication and social



media for children and deployed parents because it provides a medium to strengthen and freshen familial relationships. Importantly, the findings of this paper inform decisions to increase or restrict internet and social media access for deployed military members. The results of this study demonstrate the benefits and challenges associated with these forms of communication.

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