

OMK CAMPS HELP YOUTH DEVELOP SELF-EFFICACY TO DEAL WITH THE CHALLENGES OF MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS

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Military youth have unique challenges that set them apart from their peers. When a parent is deployed, they may experience more responsibilities at home, changes to everyday activities, and disruption of family routines (Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2012); more stress (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010); greater anxiety and emotional difficulties (Knobloch et al., 2012; Lester et al., 2010); increased behavior problems (Barker & Berry, 2009); and problems at school (Pfefferbaum, Houston, Sherman, & Melson, 2011; Richardson et al., 2011).

Attending a summer camp has been linked to multiple positive outcomes including growth in self-esteem, social skills, positive behaviors and attitudes, physical abilities, and creative thinking (Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007). These positive youth development outcomes align with the suggestions made by Huebner and Mancini (2005, 2010) to help military youth cope with the negative outcomes of deployment. Thus, camps have become quite popular as a setting to conduct programming to address the unique needs of military youth. Operation: Military Kids (OMK), the U.S. Army's collaborative effort with 4-H to support youth who are impacted by deployment, has conducted camps in some states for as long as nine years. However, there has been limited research published on the specific outcomes related to participation.

In 2012 OMK camps intentionally targeted skills in four areas: self-efficacy, communication, coping, and social skills. Camp directors used multiple opportunities to embed these skills into the design of the camp environment and the activities. For example, as a way to enhance teamwork (i.e., social skills), various icebreakers and teambuilding activities were part of the opening day of camp. These fun activities were designed to create a welcoming environment that facilitates immediate belonging to the camp community. Other activities were specific to the military audience, such as devoting a portion of the program where military service personnel from different branches of the service have a structured time to interact with the campers. This aspect of the program was designed to communicate about military values and instill pride in being a military kid. Other aspects of military culture were more subtle such as service members teaching about flag reveille and retreat and staffing an operations tent.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their capability to complete tasks (Bandura, 2006). A higher level of self-efficacy can improve an individual's ability to handle and adapt to challenging situations. Bandura (1997) identified four sources that influence the development of efficacious beliefs: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal or social persuasion, and one's emotional and physiological state.

Research about self-efficacy and youth self-efficacy is extensive, but limited studies have looked at self-efficacy in a camp setting, and no known studies have looked at military youth's self-efficacy. The belief is that by increasing youth's self-efficacy toward the deployment-related

communication, coping, and social skills, military youth will be more resilient in dealing with everyday issues and also with those stressors unique to having a parent serving in the military.

Methods and Analysis Procedures

The purpose of this study was to explore to what extent participation in OMK camps affected military youth's self-efficacy for communication, coping, and social skills. A researcher-developed instrument was created because no existing instruments were available to measure the concepts of interest. In addition to demographic questions, the instrument contained items regarding communication (11 items), coping (17 items), and social skills (11 items) as they related to deployment. Two parallel forms were created, one for youth and the other for parents. Items for the military self-efficacy scale were developed based upon Bandura's (2006) *Guide for Constructing Self-Efficacy Scales*. Bandura (2006) recommended a 100-point response scale, but the instrument for this youth population used an 11-point scale as recommended by Muris (2001). The scale for all items was 0 – Not Confident, 5 – Moderately Confident, 10 – Highly Confident. Reliability coefficients ranged from .87 to .97. Additional open-ended questions were asked to gain further insight into perceptions of camp participation and its influence on the aforementioned skills.

The process for data collection used a modified version of Dillman's Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2000). Data were collected using the Qualtrics web-based survey software. A retrospective post-pretest methodology was used to evaluate participants approximately three months after camp. The participants were military youth ($n = 35$) who attended 2012 OMK camps in two states and their parents or guardians ($n = 48$), for a 20% and 27% response rate, respectively. Paired t -tests for the post/pretest were conducted and the differences in responses were analyzed for both respondent groups.

Results

Positive gains were seen across all three skill sets from both the youth and adult perspectives. Youth reported the largest increase in their self-efficacy for their communication skills (Grand $M = 1.64$), followed by social skills (Grand $M = 1.57$) and then coping skills (Grand $M = 1.25$). The paired t -tests showed a significant difference across all but seven items, two each in communication and social, and three in coping. Adult respondents reported a similar pattern; they thought that youth showed the most improvement in their communication skills (Grand $M = 1.65$), followed by social skills (Grand $M = 1.57$), and then coping skills (Grand $M = 1.41$). These paired t -tests showed that all items were statistically significant. Both youth and adults rated youth at or above the moderately confident level across every question on the military self-efficacy questionnaire.

Youth and adults both perceived the highest increase for youths' self-efficacy for communication skills. Youth reported the largest increase in their ability to tell others why they are proud to be from a military family. Adults reported the largest increases in their campers' ability to make and keep friends who are from a military family. Open-ended responses overwhelmingly supported that making new friends and seeing friends from previous years was one of the greatest benefits of attending a camp.

Conclusions and Camp Applications

Overall, military youth and their parents felt that camp made a positive impact on campers' self-efficacy for communication, coping, and social skills as they related to

deployment. The low response rate limits the generalizability of these findings, but the results are consistent with the literature on military youth, for example, regarding the presence of a caring adult (Lemmon & Chartrand, 2009) and the positive impact of the social connectedness youth feel with other military youth (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, Jaycox, Tenielian, Han, Burns, & Ruder, 2011; Huebner & Mancini, 2005; Mmari et al., 2010).

As previously noted, these camps were intentionally designed to foster the specific skills that were targeted in this study. We recommend that those who conduct camps for military youth should likewise strive to create an environment conducive for enhancing self-efficacy by providing opportunities for being with peers experiencing the same situations, designing embedded opportunities for skill building, and training for counselors and adult staff so they can foster a sense of pride, belonging, and camaraderie. These finding may also be useful to those working with other special populations in the camp setting.

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