

Students with a Service Member Sibling

Although extensive research on military families exists, few studies specifically evaluate the effect of sibling military service on students. This lack of research suggests that this is an area requiring additional attention. As research indicates that students with parents serving in the military often benefit from additional supports and services, it is likely that students with siblings in the military would also benefit from additional support. The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State identified two peer-reviewed studies relevant to students with military siblings, described below, that may inform future practice:

The first study included eight college-aged participants with siblings serving in the military. The participants provided two narratives: one describing reactions to and life changes because of a family member joining the military and the other describing the life changes and reactions of their other family members. Five themes emerged from these narratives: initial family conflict, followed by reconciliation and becoming a “support team;” loss and anxiety throughout the family; changing family roles; finding meaning and greater purpose in light of the sibling’s military service; and that the sibling relationship before military service affected the relationship during and after military service. Overall, the participants were more likely to speak positively about their sibling’s service than negatively.

Although this study indicates that the sibling and family system initially experiences conflict, anxiety, loss, and changes in family roles, the family eventually accepts the service and considers the positive outcomes that both the family and the Service member gain from their military enlistment, such as a positive role model for the other family members, a stronger appreciation for loved ones, or greater stability and direction in the life of the Service member. Although the sibling’s service may eventually be considered a positive experience for families, students with Service member siblings need support (Rodriguez & Margolin, 2011).

The second study included 14,149 students in 5th, 7th, 9th, and 11th grades. Students with military Service member siblings had significantly more lifetime substance abuse (i.e., lifetime abuse of alcohol, marijuana, or prescription drugs) than their peers with Service member parents as well as their civilian peers. This is correlational research; therefore, it is unclear whether students engage in more substance abuse due to their Service member sibling, or if there is an additional variable influencing their behavior. However, this study indicates that students with sibling Service members may need extra support and possibly substance abuse interventions (Gilreath et al., 2013).

Although there is little research to inform best practices for supporting students with military service member siblings, school personnel should be aware of these students as well as any other students with Service members in their family. While welcoming new students to your school or classroom, be sure to identify any type of military connection.

References

- Gilreath, T. D., Cederbaum, J. A., Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Pineda, D., & Atuel, H. (2013). Substance use among military-connected youth. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 44*(2), 150-153. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2012.09.059
- Rodriguez, A. J., & Margolin, G. (2011). Siblings of military servicemembers: A qualitative exploration of individual and family systems reactions. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 42*(4), 316-323. doi:10.1037/a0024527