

# Protective Factors in Families: Themes From a Socioecological Study of Australian Defence Force Families Experiencing Parental Deployment

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Marg Rogers-Baber<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Families sometimes face prolonged and frequent absences of a parent due to employment in industries that require work away or for military deployment. Many families, however, are finding ways to survive and thrive. Within Australian Defence Force (ADF) families, despite the high stress and inherent danger, most do cope, displaying strength and resilience. Limited research has been conducted with Australian military families with young children, even less focusing on protective factors. There is particularly a dearth of research about families who have left the ADF or who have experienced the death of an ADF parent. This study offers unique insights through exploring family experiences of parental deployment by applying a socioconstructivist approach from data derived through narrative research. Protective factors were identified through relationships, the ADF, social media, community organizations, government departments, and digital communication technologies. Understanding how these families manage and the protective factors they utilize may enable early childhood educators and family support services to better understand family resilience, and thus provide appropriate services for military families with young children.

## Keywords

defense family, military deployment, resilience, protective factors

## Stories From ADF families

### Family 1

He (Sam, 3 years) didn't understand the difference between deployment and going to work, which created huge meltdowns when Caleb was home after deployment and then said he was going to "work."

### Family 2

You are not really in or out after they die. I find it hard to connect with other defence families at Army unit days.

### Family 3

He was also really upset by some of the parenting decisions I had made in his absence. It was hard having those very honest conversations where he was saying he thought those decisions were wrong.

ongoing stress associated with prolonged absence of one family member. This stress places other individual family members, as well as the whole family unit, at risk and contributes to higher levels of workplace attrition (Pincombe & Pincombe, 2010). Risk factors are experiences and issues that place strain on the well-being of the family unit, and thus the children. In particular, Pincombe and Pincombe (2010) noted that families who are apart are likely to grow further apart the longer the separation. Despite this, there are a significant number of families who find ways to cope with this kind of stress (McGuire et al., 2012).

Research about Australian military families is very limited and urgently needed (McFarlane, 2009; Siebler, 2009). Globally, research about the influence of protective factors within these families is scarce, hence, limiting defense forces and others who assist the families to effectively strengthen, target, and resource their support. Protective factors in

<sup>1</sup>University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia

## Corresponding Author:

Marg Rogers-Baber, Early Childhood, School of Education, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales 2351, Australia.  
Email: mbaber@une.edu.au

## Introduction

As it is clear from these stories, in addition to fears for the safety of deployed parents, military families deal with the



families act as a buffer in times of stress and change (Cologon & Hayden, 2012), and protect their “well-being, outcomes and mental health” (Wilson, 2016, p. 13). Protective factors are “experiences that can help the development of positive social and emotional skills, essential for good mental health” (Australian Government & Beyondblue, 2014). Within military families, despite the stresses of deployment, most families seem to manage short-term separations that are less than 6 months (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009), and show strengths and resiliency (Jensen-Hart, Christensen, Dutka, & Leishman, 2012; Sheppard, Malatras, & Israel, 2010). To date, much research has been focused on understanding the impacts of deployment on families and children, but little is understood about the protective factors that operate to support families throughout the deployment cycle (Lincoln, Swift, & Shorteno-Fraser, 2008; Palmer, 2008). Knowledge about family stressors helps direct policy makers to work toward reducing stresses within the workplace and the broader community, and may contribute to raising the awareness of professionals who collaborate with families.

This study uses the socioecological model, created by Bronfenbrenner (1986), to explain both the origins and effects of the stresses military families face and the protective factors that buffer them during difficult times. The model is made up of concentric circles and places the child at the individual level at the center. The next layer of the model is the microsystem, made up of those people the child has direct contact with. This typically includes immediate family members, peers, health workers, and educators. The levels of congruence within the microsystem are termed the mesosystem (Grace, Hayes, & Wise, 2016). The next layer consists of those people the child normally does not have regular contact with and is called the exosystem. This may include parent’s workplaces, community services, government policies, media, family friends, and extended family that live away. The macrosystem surrounds the exosystem and is made up of the culture, ideologies, economy, and global issues. Finally, within the model, the chronosystem is the changes that occur over time for the individual child due to developmental changes or changes in circumstances. This model takes into account the changeable physical, social, and psychological environment in which they live (Grace et al., 2016). In such a view, children are impacted by their environment but also impact upon their environment. The following sections outline the relevant literature that underpins the study.

## Characteristics of Healthy Family Functioning

Healthy family functioning is about families spending time together, building and maintaining intimate relationships. These intimate relationships involve supporting, sharing, and caring for each other within the family unit, and it includes couples, children, other kin, and family friends (Poole, 2011). According to Sims (2002), strong families are flexible and view change positively, work together to cope, can identify

when outside assistance is needed and connect with extended family, friends, community, and their culture. Shimoni and Baxter (2008) believed that strong families effectively communicate, value one other, have a shared belief, and balance their needs. In addition, they support others in times of need and try to reconcile differences (Sims, 2002). The ability to maintain levels of intimacy and family strength is challenged when a family member is absent for significant periods of time, such as when a parent is away for work. Currently, this occurs among families who experience long absences of at least one parent due to military deployment or employment on oilrigs. Other families may experience frequent parental absences for military training, transport industry requirements, and Fly-In-Fly-Out (FIFO) and Drive-In-Drive-Out (DIDO) mining rosters. These frequent absences can be just as difficult as prolonged absences, as Hubinger, Parker, and Calavarino (2002) explained the frequent separations and reintegrations are emotionally draining.

## Protective Factors in Military Families

Although the study of protective factors within military families is limited, and much more is needed, this section outlines some of the findings within the literature. For nondeployed spouses, Spera (2009) found that military “unit relationship quality, leadership effectiveness, and tangible social support from community members” were the most important protective factors to well-being (p. 286). For returned personnel, Rentz et al. (2007) outlined that protective factors such as disciplinary measures particular to the military may help decrease the prevalence of family violence and addictions, but unfortunately these measures may increase the likelihood of nondisclosure due to stigma and fear of curtailed career progression. For children experiencing difficulties during deployment, Saltzman et al. (2011) explained that nurturing and adaptive parenting are the most important protective factors. For families, Andres and Coulthard (2015), in a cross-country comparison, found that effective communication was a protective factor. In the Australian Timor-Leste study, identified protective factors included parental and child well-being, relationship quality, access to care, social support, and the family’s ability to function during times of increased stress (McGuire et al., 2012). Importantly, the Timor-Leste study did not explore the role of other protective factors addressed in this article: relationships with educators support through social media, relationship quality through digital communication technology, effective parenting, and economic security.

## Stresses and Risk Factors Caused by Work-Related Parental Absences and Deployment

Deployment itself causes ongoing stress for the deployed parent, even after they are back at home. Deployment for

**Table 1.** Stressors in Families Experiencing Work-Related Parental Absences.

Common stressors	Stressors with lengthy absences	Stressors with shorter absences
Parent working away withdraws emotionally and ignores personal needs (Kalaf, 2014)	Safety issues affect the whole family (De Angelis & Segal, 2015; De Pedro & Astor, 2011)	Parent leaving unprepared for the lifestyle before starting the job (Kalaf, 2014; Meredith, Rush, & Robinson, 2014)
Family members not utilizing services (Torkington, Larkins, & Gupta, 2011) due to limited knowledge, access issues, or stigma (Kalaf, 2014; Meredith et al., 2014)	CSR and PTSD affect the whole family (Pincombe & Pincombe, 2010)	Increased rates of sleep disturbance (Vojnovic, Michelson, Jackson, & Bahn, 2014); depression, loneliness, substance abuse (Torkington et al., 2011) for the parent working away
Increased difficulties for divorced, separated, and/or families who have other major stresses (Kalaf, 2014; Siebler, 2009)	Times of separation and reintegration are very difficult for whole family (Pincombe & Pincombe, 2010)	At-home parent's emotional outbursts and tensions indicate a "lack of emotional and informational support" (Hubinger, Parker, & Calavarino, 2002, p. 81)
Increased stress due to isolation and increased domestic and child-rearing duties for the at-home parent (Hubinger et al., 2002; Meredith et al., 2014)	Deployed parent's reintegration into the community can be difficult (MacManus et al., 2012) and exacerbated due to the unpopularity of particular conflicts (De Pedro & Astor, 2011)	At-home parents report difficulty with partners reconnecting, socializing, and meeting their sexual needs (Hubinger et al., 2002)
Difficulty with consistent coparenting (Lester et al., 2015; Meredith et al., 2014)		
Difficulty for families with children with mental health issues or disabilities (Norman, 2015; Siebler, 2009)		
Relocation of the family can create added stress (Allan, 2011; De Angelis & Segal, 2015; De Pedro & Astor, 2011)		
Higher stress levels for all family members before the parent leaves (Kalaf, 2014; Rentz et al., 2007) and on return (Meredith et al., 2014); drinking culture of the worksite merging into the home (MacManus et al., 2012; Meredith et al., 2014)		

Note. CSR = combat stress disorder; PTSD = post traumatic stress disorder.

combat, peacekeeping, and border protection can result in a combat stress response (CSR; Pincombe & Pincombe, 2010), moral injury (Sherman, 2010), or mental health issues, including depression, addictions, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and violence. Compounding this issue is a strong acculturation process that positions seeking help as a route to potential dismissal and the impact disclosure could have on their career progression (Crompvoets, 2012). Stressors unique to shorter or lengthy parental absences and stressors that are common across all parental absences are summarized in Table 1.

Palmer (2008) and Pincus, House, Christenson, and Adler (2007) outlined the reasons military families are at risk, both as a family unit and as individuals due to the ongoing stresses they experience. For families, poor access to communication was found to be a risk factor by Andres and Coulthard (2015) in a cross-country comparison. For children, some risk factors are associated with the nondeployed parent's reduced ability to manage effectively due to the stress of parenting alone.

## Strengths-Based Approach

Strengths-based approaches are more commonly accepted as the best way to assist families, but conversely Wilson (2016) reported that the evidence to confirm this approach is only just emerging. Concentrating on the negative is a legacy of the medical model that adheres to a deficit model of human behavior (Graybeal, 2001). It is an approach many professionals cling to because of their conventional instruction in this approach (Sims, 2002) and one that infiltrates policy makers.

Strengths-based practice is grounded in the concept that strong families not only cope but also flourish despite the stressors they face. Bowes and Warburton (2012) described family strengths that arise from the way families communicate, problem solve, make decisions, interact and sustain relationships. The operation of these strengths changes over time as families respond to stress inside and outside the family (Bowes & Warburton, 2012). A more comprehensive list of the characteristics of strong families that has been adapted from Sims (2002) is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of Strong Families.

Strong families
Are committed to one another practically and verbally
Encourage one another to pursue individual goals within a cohesive unit
Spend plenty of time together observing family customs, anniversaries, celebrations, formal ceremonies, and routines
Enjoy being with each other, care for one another, and appreciate each member
Are flexible and view change in a positive light
Work together to cope and can identify when outside help is needed
Are connected with extended family and/or family friends, community, and culture that increases their resource base as needed
Help others in times of need
Give emotional, social, community, informational, and altruistic support
Communicate well without blame or prejudice
Try to reconcile differences
Share happiness and utilize humor to reduce stress
Share experiences, emotions, and hopes

Source. Adapted from Sims (2002).

Contemporary early childhood education, social work, and community work focuses on working with families from a strengths-based approach as described by Guo and Tsui (2010) and Sims (2002). This approach requires professionals to understand the protective factors that can empower families to thrive even when they are experiencing challenges (Anuradha, 2004) or are at risk. It is important to note that risk and protective factors are not static within families and individuals (Allison et al., 2003; Hawley, 2000). Furthermore, Sims (2002) identified a number of protective factors within the various levels of the ecological family system, as outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1986), starting from individual characteristics and moving through the various layers where government decisions and policies within the macrosystem impact on the family and child.

Once these strengths and resources have been identified, professionals can work with families on utilizing the resources to improve the current issues or situation (Anuradha, 2004). As Itzhaky and Bustin (2002) stated, this process empowers individuals and families. It helps children to utilize support factors within the community and family (Allison et al., 2003), thus building resilience through the provision of services. For early childhood educators, the strengths-based model aligns with Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) because it begins with what children are familiar with and what they can already manage (Sims, 2011). This complex process involves empowering the parents and children as they acquire and demonstrate the language skills and practices effective in the context in which they are operating. In

the strengths-based approach, it is hoped that eventually these acquired skills become established behaviors within the family.

## Protective Factors

The study here concentrates on the protective factors that enable families with young children attending early childhood services to manage and thrive under difficult circumstances. The wide variety of these factors may be useful for professionals and policy makers who work with these families by revealing a broad picture of families' capacities and limitations. Concentrating on families with young children emphasizes the importance of the early years. Internationally, research corroborates easier access to quality education and care in the early years that is acknowledged by the Australian Government's programs and policies (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2015).

Closer examination of the protective factors is useful because it enables support services and professionals, including early childhood educators, to understand and explore family strengths, and thus provide appropriate resources. Importantly, engaging effectively with potentially vulnerable families and children in early childhood settings is vital before crisis intervention is necessary and negative behaviors have become entrenched (Bowes, Hayes, Cashmore, & Hodge, 2012). In early childhood settings, parents are more likely to actively engage in authentic partnerships with educators and associated professionals; and, through the building of relationships and trust, information exchange and provisions can be targeted where there is apparent need (Wilson, 2016). While globally there has been "an increased recognition of the importance of the early years" (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2012, p. 2) due to funding shortages within Australia, early intervention programs often focus on the families who are either in crisis or have the highest need (Bowes, Hayes, et al., 2012). This lack of funding to preventive programs transfers the responsibility to parents, early childhood educators, and family workers to source the information and provision needed to effectively assist children who are living under stressful circumstances, such as the absence of a parent due to work.

This study focuses on the protective factors identified within three families with young children who experienced prolonged parental deployments and frequent, short-term parent training periods away from home during Australian Defence Force (ADF) service. The data allow us to examine their experiences and importantly give us rare insight into a family who had left the ADF and another who has experienced a death of a parent.

## Method

In this study, a narrative methodology was employed that involves rebuilding individual experiences within personal

**Table 3.** Participant Information.

Family number	Children	Parents	Experience of deployment	Experiences of lengthy training sessions since having children
Family 1	Sam (4 years old), Jess (19 months old)	Father (Caleb), mother (Fiona)	Father initially deployed for 8 months. His second deployment was 6 months. Sam has experienced both deployments, while Jess was born after the first deployment.	Many
Family 2	Michael (5 years old), only child	Father (Nathan), deceased mother (Wendy)	Father deployed before Michael's birth, then returned after family leave. One previous deployment when Nathan was single.	Not applicable
Family 3	Brian (3 years old) and Davina (18 months old)	Father (Seb), mother (Brenda)	Father has deployed for 9 months previously, experienced by both children	Many

and social contexts (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), solicited through research (Polkinghorne, 2007). While narrative research is considered a contemporary approach, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) argued that we have discussed the stories we tell for about as long as we have been telling them. Gottschall (2012) believed that humans have been telling stories since they have been on earth, and this ability is what sets humans apart as a species. Narrative methodologies have become increasingly popular in the fields of social science bringing with them higher levels of analysis and discourse around stories and their importance in our lives (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). This study examines the stories participants share about their experiences of deployment and their interpretations of these stories.

## Participants

The participants were engaged through convenience sampling of three families. The families were invited to participate due to their involvement in a storybook project about defense families as part of a larger, unpublished doctoral study titled "Young Children's Experience and Understanding of Deployment Within an ADF Family." The unique data from these three families, including five children, were separated into a subset, as summarized in Table 3. The three families represent two different Australian states and were from three different military bases.

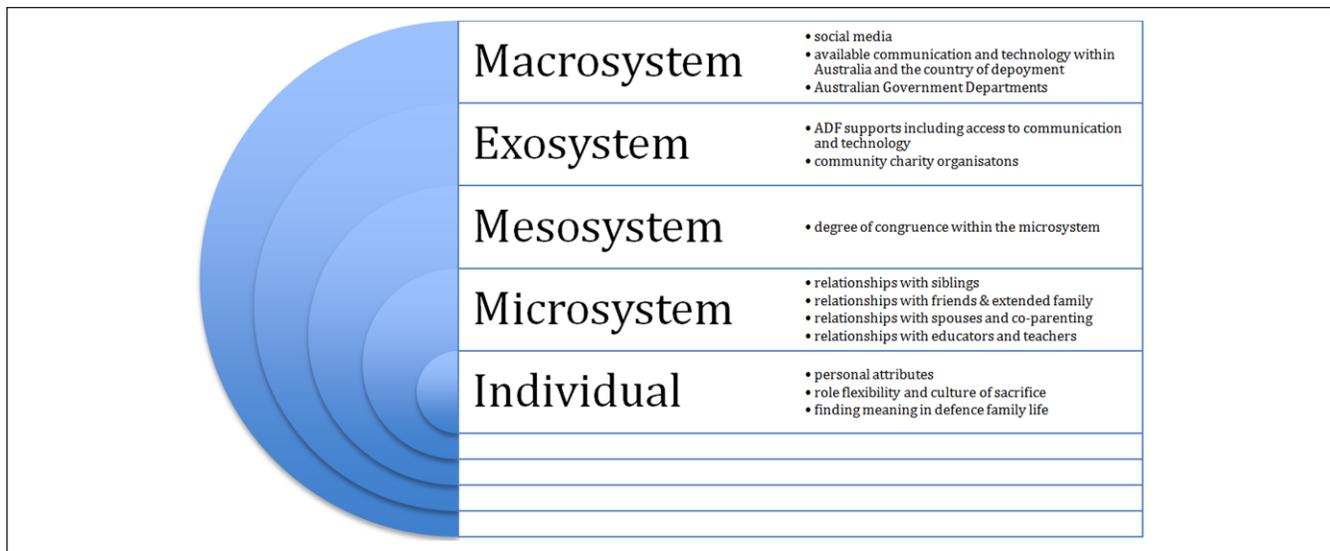
Caleb, from Family 1, had left the defense force during the period of data collection. In Family 2, Nathan had come home on leave briefly after the birth of Michael; however, he was killed in action very soon after he returned to active service. In Family 3, Seb was undergoing extensive training (away from home) to prepare him for further deployments. Table 3 lists the ages of the children at initial contact with the family, although the data were collected using various methods over a 3-year time frame. Small-scale studies such as this often face issues of identity protection of participants. Newman and Pollnitz (2005) discussed the importance of maintaining self-sufficiency, and managing personal information and identity.

For this reason, the data have been scrambled between families, pseudonyms were used, and some of their details were changed.

To understand the context of the participants, it is important to have a degree of knowledge concerning the ADF as an employer. As one of the biggest employers in Australia, the ADF has more than 80,000 permanent and reserve personnel (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) working across the Navy, Airforce, and Army. Most of these employees are at an age at which they have a young family or are starting to have children. The ADF (2013) described deployment as normally lasting 3 to 9 months, and may involve peacekeeping, strategic, or combat operations. Redeployment rates are as high as 33% of all personnel who stay with the ADF. Attrition rates are of concern for the ADF (Department of Defence, 2010) due to the loss of skills and the high cost of training and recruitment.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over a period of 3 years via face-to-face interviews, emails, and phone conversations with families utilizing the mode of contact that suited families and the researcher at the time. Contact with the families for interviews and conversations occurred 4 to 6 times during this period. The interviews were semistructured, and questions centered on themes about their experiences of deployment as parents, coparents and as a couple. I also explored their perceptions of the children's experiences and understandings and the protective factors they utilized. Member checking occurred by presenting the parents with various data outputs for validation. To increase researcher integrity and reflexivity, I maintained a reflective journal during the process, and discussed the findings and themes with other academics and research supervisors to monitor any inherent bias. The parents were positioned as knowledgeable source of information about their children. In narrative data collection, thick, rich descriptions of the contexts, environment, participants' emotions, and nuances are necessary to enable the researcher



**Figure 1.** Summary of protective factors identified in the three families applying Bronfenbrenner's (1986) socioecological model.  
 Note. ADF = Australian Defence Force.

to look for transferrable data through shared characteristics (Moen, 2006). Once this awareness was constructed, analysis of the data was undertaken.

Data were analyzed using a thematic approach and application of Bronfenbrenner's (1986) socioecological framework to understand the way families created meaning in their lives. The steps in narrative analysis included first an immersion in the data. Second, a narrative retelling of the data was created from all sources of data for each family while keeping in mind the adult's role and authority in the children's lives. Third, these family narratives were developed from themes within the framework, emerging from the data by inductive analysis. Fourth, the data were inspected again, moving from description to an interpretation of participants' accounts within the research themes (Willis, 2013). Narrative analysis is a useful method in this research field because it brings out the hidden voice (Spector-Mersel, 2010) and emphasizes that there is not one truth or interpretation. As Reissman (2005) explained, narrative analysis can create links between stories and social and political organization.

The next section explores the themes identified within the data.

### Overview of Protective Factors Employing Bronfenbrenner's Model as a Framework for Analysis

A major theme that emerged from the data was the importance of protective factors in the young children's life and their family. These factors encompassed relationships, the ADF, community provisions, and communication and technology. These themes reflect the concept of resilience by focusing on positive outcomes and utilizing a strengths-based approach as described

by Cologon and Hayden (2012). When examining resilience, the relationship between protective factors, susceptibilities, and liabilities is highlighted (Cologon & Hayden, 2012). The quality of the protective factors within the layers of the socioecological family system will often affect the families' ability to survive the deployment cycle. Being a member of the defense community builds resilience because of the protective factors it provides (Baber, Fussell, & Porter, 2015). In this study, the narrative data reveal varying protective factors within the case study families across the four levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1986) model shown in Figure 1.

### Themes From the Data

In the next section, each identified protective factor is examined in turn with reference to the layers within the socioecological model. The identified protective factors are summarized in Figure 2.

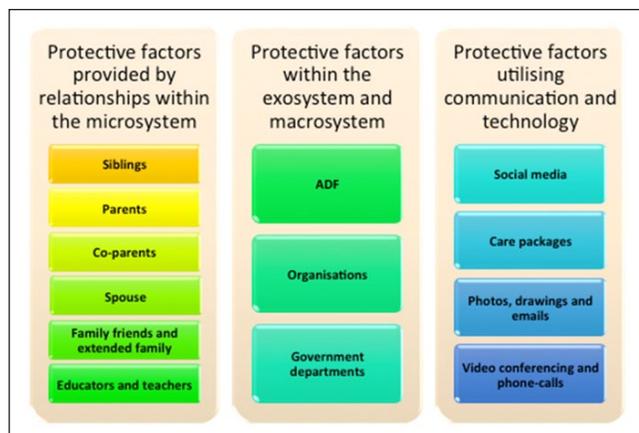
#### Protective Factors Provided by Relationships (Microsystem)

The protective factors provided by relationships with siblings, parents, family friends, extended family, educators, and teachers are explored in the next three sections.

##### Sibling relationships

###### Family 3

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.



**Figure 2.** Identified protective factors within the families' socioecological model.

Note. ADF = Australian Defence Force.

Typical of sibling relationships, Brian and Davina in Family 3 exhibited some competition for parental attention, as evidenced by the verbal and physical altercations over phone calls with their deployed father. Conversely, Fiona from Family 1, as a positive response, identified sibling assistance, role flexibility, and emotional support:

#### Family 1

Sam was also helpful at home, he would bring me toys and give me cuddles, bring me the tissue box if I was crying and help with the bins, gardening and feeding the dogs. He would also help me to get Jess ready sometimes if we were going out.

#### Parenting relationships

##### Family 1

I had some photo books made with photos of Caleb and the kids. We also video-recorded Caleb reading to the children that they loved to watch. We made up a special calendar so Sam could mark the days he was away with stickers. He didn't understand the difference between deployment and going to work, which created huge meltdowns when Caleb was home after deployment and then said he was going to "work."

##### Family 3

We were all having trouble sleeping and Brian was having nightmares. It just saved the fights at the time and was much easier on everyone. I think I just had to get through it at the time by doing things my way.

In Family 3, Brenda displayed responsive and supportive parenting by adjusting to the children's physical and emotional responses and allowing them into her bed, and by providing support to help Sam understand the concepts of deployment. In Family 1, as shown below, both Caleb and

Fiona showed role flexibility during the initial time of reintegration. In addition, Caleb and Fiona revealed parenting strengths and emotional support for their children by revisiting unresolved issues the children had. They were surprised the children's emotional issues were still evident a year after Caleb had left the ADF:

#### Family 1

After Afghanistan Caleb decided to take a step back for the re-integration period. This meant I took care of them and all discipline was handled by me for the first couple of weeks.

I was surprised to see how upset Sam got since Caleb hasn't been away for a large stint since last year. It has shown me how much they have held onto the emotions they used to feel when he was away and how raw it obviously still is for them. It was a good chance for Caleb to have a good chat to them about the whole thing.

#### Coparenting relationships

##### Family 1 Caleb

We had never planned as a family that I would be there forever. In the end it came down to more time away for promotion and I was away all of 2012, came home in February for 6 weeks, then home for 2 weeks then away for 3-4 months again. The main reason I left was just lifestyle. It was the right decision for our family to leave.

##### Family 1 Fiona

When Jess turned 3 we realized Caleb had only been there 1 year of her life. All the time away was the big issue for us. Caleb had missed the first soccer games and other big events in the children's lives. Getting used to Caleb being home full-time took a while for the children. Sam acted out at him being home all the time and would avoid him and Jess did not want to speak to him in the mornings. She would completely ignore him at other times. I told Caleb the kids were "punishing him" for having been away for so long. Since leaving things are much easier for us all. We can plan events and know we will all be there, including the holidays. The uncertainty is gone. The children are more settled. It's great knowing the time you have will be yours as a family.

These data reveal Family 1's ability to make career decisions in the interest of family cohesion, showing flexibility with goals and arrangements. It displays the family's ability to move on positively despite lingering issues from the past, such as the children's behaviors. It shows their ability to focus on the improvements such changes have brought to the family as a whole, regardless of the drawbacks of financial and career sacrifices. In the example below, Brenda from Family 3 exhibited determination to spend time together as a family unit, despite her husband's protests. It demonstrates Seb's struggles with reintegration as a parent when decisions

have been made he disagrees with and children have developed new skills and matured in his absence. The vignette demonstrates Brenda's empathetic response, by avoiding blame for the difficulties that arose during reintegration:

Family 3

I made him come away on a family holiday soon after he came back. He didn't want to, but it made a big difference to reconnect. It is hard as the kids were up to different stages so he was often babying them and they didn't want to be babied. Nine months is a long time in a young child's life and they changed a lot. He was also really upset by some of the parenting decisions I had made in his absence. It was hard having those very honest conversations where he was saying he thought those decisions were wrong. I made them to cope during that tough time. Issues like the kids coming and sleeping in our bed.

He was really tired (during reintegration) and tried sleeping during the day to catch up. The kids just made really loud noises suddenly and he would be angry at being woken up. I kept saying: "They are just young kids, Seb." He said it is hard because when you are on base you are with adults for 9 months, but adults who are good at following orders. When he came home, he was dealing with a toddler and a preschooler.

*Spousal relationships (individual)*

Family 1

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 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 came 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.

Family 3

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.

In this study, two families spoke of the issues around protecting each other from what was happening at home. One family was told by the ADF to keep stressful issues to themselves to avoid distracting the deployed parent. The other nondeployed parent just kept quiet about her struggles without being instructed by defense personnel to do so. Both

nondeployed parents spoke of the later difficulties this caused in their communication when the deployed parent eventually realized the truth. Similarly, the deployed parents did not share detailed matters of defense with their spouses to avoid burdening them with what they were witnessing and experiencing and for security reasons.

At the individual level of Bronfenbrenner's (1986) model, parents choose to filter the information given to the other spouse, and the nondeployed parent often controls what the children communicate to soften the news. Brooks (2011) stressed the importance of establishing boundaries about what is shared in communication. Minute details may be overwhelming for deployed parents, and they may become distracted through worrying about how to solve issues at home when they are away (Brooks, 2011). Conversely, Tomforde (2015) explained one coping strategy of the spouses of German deployed military personnel that involved writing everything down, including all the emotions they were experiencing in letters or diaries. Carefully chosen excerpts of the diaries were sent to the deployed spouse during deployment or left at home for them to read when they returned. In their U.S.-based research, Andres, De Angelis, and McCone (2015) discovered that deployed spouses generally protected their spouse by keeping military operations to themselves. Family members at home may become anxious if the deployed parent shares too much about their operations or surrounds (Brooks, 2011). In line with these family's experiences, stress can be caused by unhealthy family communication patterns which include both ignoring other family members and sharing too much information (Dekel, Wadsworth, & Sanchez, 2015).

*Family friends and extended family relationships*

Family 1

My parents were great during both deployments, but especially the first because I moved in with them. There was another mother whose husband was a FIFO worker (Fly in Fly Out miner). I don't think I would have survived without her.

Family 2

We were living in Army accommodation and then he found out he was to be deployed. They offered me the option of relocating to be with my family as we were both away from family at the base.

Family 3

Before he left, we moved to the coast to be near my Mum and Dad so I could have that support when he deployed. We had lots of sleepovers with them and they would look after me. It's nice going home and someone caring about me. The kids also just go there and I have a break sometimes. Working part time, having the kids and coping by yourself is hard, so they are a big help.

The narrative data demonstrated that nondeployed parents found assistance during their first deployment experience from their own parents. The ADF offered families the opportunity to relocate to be near other family members during deployment, and families were grateful for the ADF's facilitating role. The extended family provided both physical and emotional support. Some of the nondeployed parents viewed this support as offering opportunities to catch up on rest, helping them cope with the demands of parenting alone, and alleviating their feelings of being stretched. Relocation closer to extended family also provided opportunities for parents to access child minding that enabled them to socialize, thus reducing their feelings of isolation. The parents often cited benefits, including special time for the children with their grandparents and other extended family. Interestingly, following the death of a parent, the ADF severing these supports was taken personally during such an emotional time, as shown in the excerpt below:

#### Family 2

I took up the offer (of relocating to her parent's house) and most of our belongings were packed up and left in a Commonwealth Storage Facility for when Nathan returned. Six months after the funeral they moved our belongings down to my mother's house because they could no longer be in a Commonwealth Storage Facility. I was no longer considered a defence family. That was a rude shock. You are not really in or out after they die.

In Family 1, Fiona's narrative data identified that she found the second deployment, when she had two young children, more difficult than the first when she had only one child. She and her children did not relocate to be near her own parents during the second deployment and when both children were very sick for an extended period, her narrative outlined how difficult and stressful she found this experience. Given the absence of family close by, both Fiona and Caleb reported how they found the physical and emotional encouragement given by a family friend as critical to their coping. The friend, who was in a similar situation because her husband worked away as a FIFO worker at a mine site, was more easily able to empathize and respond appropriately. Fiona was not living on a military base at the time, reducing the amount of available support.

#### *Educators and teacher relationships*

##### Family 2

The Early Childhood teacher was great and helped me access funding for a specialist for Michael due to his hyperactivity. His school teacher is not very helpful getting a letter organized to help with funding now that he has been diagnosed with ADHD and Asperger's. The school counsellor has had a chat to Michael too.

In Family 2, Wendy emphasized the importance of a supportive early childhood educator who was able to help source

defense funding for her son Michael's additional learning needs. Subsequently, Wendy had more difficulty building this type of relationship with Michael's first primary school-teacher, and this affected the provision of additional school assistance. She believed that Michael's education suffered because of the difference of opinion about the need to access funding to support his learning difficulties. In the excerpt below, Fiona from Family 1 stressed the importance of the provision and knowledge of Sam's early childhood educator who was able to suggest effective strategies to assist family communication. Sam initially reacted with joy for the first few days when his father returned from deployment or lengthy training episodes. This subsequently changed to ongoing displays of anger and refusals to speak to his father or be physically near him for a number of weeks, affecting the father's anxiousness about reintegration each time. Interestingly, Caleb attributed the eventual improvement to Sam's increasing maturity:

#### Family 1 Fiona

Sam's preschool teacher was amazing and had child psychology training. She was very helpful with Sam's phases and behavior and encouraged us to have conversations with Sam when he was acting out before the deployment. She told us Sam might have been behaving like that because of the things he may have overheard about deployment. We took her advice and put a map of the world in Sam's room with a star where we lived and one where Caleb was going to Afghanistan. Once we explained it, all the behaviour stopped immediately.

#### Family 1 Caleb

After East Timor and then during the extra time away, Sam had a rebellion against me I suppose you would say. This improved with age. There was some nervousness about coming home and trying to fit back in with the children, especially after Sam's episodes of not wanting to have anything to do with me.

### *Protective Factors Within the Exosystem and Macrosystem*

#### *ADF support*

##### Family 1 Fiona

The Padre was really good and the social worker was helpful. There was also a head person to email if anything was needed and he was really excellent. The welfare people called a few times and I totally panicked of course. Those calls were really reassuring though, after I calmed down. It was great to know that they were checking up that we were OK. For our personal experience I really don't think there was much more they (the ADF) could have done for us. We were given a book on dealing with deployment that was very informative and helpful. They covered everything from the emotions of deployment to a checklist of things we should organise before Caleb left. It also

gave tips to deal with the homecoming. I had been given a list of all the numbers and email addresses of all people we could contact if I needed help or had any questions. There was a farewell parade before Caleb left which was turned into a family day where all families got to meet each other and meet people like the welfare officer. For us I think they prepared us very well and I never felt like they were not supportive of us.

#### Family 1 Caleb

There was one talk we went to one day. It was a seminar and there were some handouts. The Welfare Officer and Padre were also available.

Family 1 identified Army Unit days as useful to connect with other families and ADF support staff. Information shared verbally and in booklets at predeployment family events was considered relevant and helpful. Being able to meet support staff, such as Padres and social workers, for possible later access was seen as useful. For Family 2, there had been a change in the chronosystem as Wendy had once enjoyed these days. Attendance at such events since the death of her husband on deployment had been difficult as she did not feel part of the defense culture anymore and found it hard to relate to families who had not experienced this type of loss, although her son enjoyed them and gave him an opportunity of mixing with other fathers. Wendy found the ADF-funded trip to the overseas base very helpful to give meaning and closure to her spouse's death:

#### Family 2

Army days are hard with the hierarchy and feeling like I am not really part of the defence culture anymore. I find it hard to connect with other defence families at Army unit days. It is hard to hear the other wives whining about how tough they have it when their husbands are on night duty. Michael enjoys them though and tends to gravitate toward the other Dads. He gets upset when he sees other Dads at school or at the park. I got a lot of closure when I was allowed with a small group of other families to Afghanistan. I got to see Nathan's room, and got some understanding of what his work was like over there for him at the base.

#### *Organization (exosystem) and government department (macro-system) support*

##### Family 2

Legacy have been helpful, but mostly are older. They got me a new computer. The local RSL (Returned Services League) branch have been a great support. The Defence Trust is also there to help but I am not entitled to the Commando Trust because I was given the wrong paper work by the Department of Veteran Affairs. (DVA)

A number of charity organizations and Australian Government Departments assist military and veteran

families. The veteran's charity organization, Legacy, had provided funding to Wendy and her son Michael (Family 2), and the organization also offered ongoing emotional care. Other assistance was welcomed from the local branch of the Returned Services League (RSL). After her spouse's death, the Department of Veterans Affairs had issued the wrong form for Wendy's claims, thus limiting her entitlements. They had, however, funded a number of needed resources but not to the level she was entitled.

#### *Protective Factors Utilizing Communication and Technology*

Both positive and negative communication and technology issues arose from the data with families during respective deployment cycles.

#### *Social media (macrosystem)*

##### Family 2

I am close to other war widows in our Facebook group. They have been a great support and know what it is like. I could access it (counselling) but it would be a waste of time. 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.

At the macrosystem level, Wendy (Family 2) took great comfort in the emotional support offered by a group of young war widows who communicated using Facebook™. Conversely, Wendy did not access the ADF-supplied counselors who she felt would not understand her. She felt her situation was unique and that being a war widow was not something counselors would understand or could assist with.

#### *Care packages (macrosystem)*

##### Family 1

He sent some parcels and we sent him a care package most weeks. We would cook his favourite biscuits and send drawings the kids did and other things.

Care packages are parcels containing presents and nonperishable food sent from home to deployed parents. Items from the deployed parent can also be sent, often containing toys or tourist items depending upon the nature and area of deployment. During deployment, the family or deployed parent can post one package a week free of charge. Parents from two of the case study families cited care packages as an effective communication strategy for the families at home to communicate with the deployed parent. Parents who discussed this type of communication used the packages to show children's artwork and send favorite food items they had baked with the children.

### *Video conferencing and phone calls (macrosystem)*

#### Family 1 Caleb

I was able to use Skype™ most days and that was great. It was really helpful to me to be able to see them and know they were safe and OK.

#### Family 1 Fiona

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 are better as Caleb can be on speakerphone and I can 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 whingey 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.

#### Family 3

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.

Another type of communication technology, video-conferencing software, such as Skype™ was often utilized by families during deployment when it is available. For one family within this study, utilizing such services was a pleasant weekly event, looked forward to by all concerned even though it involved the deployed parent lining up for lengthy periods of time. For another family, the deployed parent took great comfort in the ability to see and hear his family each night, but for the nondeployed parent it became yet another responsibility. She felt she had to cope with the nightly sessions without complaint to attend to the needs of her spouse.

## **Discussion**

This discussion focuses on the three areas of protective relationships within the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem evident from the data.

### *Protective Factors Provided by Relationships (Microsystem)*

Protective factors provided by personal relationships revealed family cohesion, support, role flexibility, and awareness. Protective factors provided by professional relationships demonstrated the parent's desire and high regard for quality partnerships.

*Personal relationships.* Many families are able to show an increased level of flexibility, with members taking on new responsibilities and roles during deployment (Bowling &

Sherman, 2008). This flexibility was revealed in Family 1 when Sam took on his father's household chores and helped his sister get ready for day care. Sibling relationships often promote resilience in children as they learn to help others in times of need, and this behavior can become an ongoing part of their lives (Brooks, 2011). However, love and friendship often go hand in hand with fights and competition within sibling relationships (Burton, Westen, & Kowalski, 2012), and children in this study also demonstrated this tension. Manigart, Lecoq, and Lo Bue (2015) identified a typical response of older siblings, where they feel they need to take care of younger siblings to assist during deployment. Shepard et al. (2010) listed "flexible gender roles and comfort performing multiple roles" as useful in helping families cope with the difficulties during deployment (p. 603). Children's emotional development begins in infancy (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 1997) and is dependent on social support (Hayes, 2013). This social and emotional development occurs most commonly within parent and sibling relationships, and therefore the manner in which these relationships operate can be protective, or conversely, potentially expose children to greater risks.

Social support across a range of levels is important to nurture resilience in families (Burton et al., 2012). In military families, as in all families, resilience is generally linked to a supportive extended family (Lemmon & Chartrand, 2009). Furthermore, Linke (2007) stressed the importance of the nondeployed parent having access to emotional and physical support. When families are stretched, they are often working at their peak emotional and physical capacity, meaning that even small changes or disruptions can cause major upsets (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2008). While one might argue that relocation could potentially trigger feelings of overload, it does appear that the family assistance resulting from the relocation mitigated the stress to an extent. In this study, all families relocated to be closer to the children's grandparents at some stage. It is clear that extended family, family friends, and educators can be a source of special relationships that operate as protective factors assisting the development of resilient children as reported by Brooks (2011).

MacManus et al. (2012), Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2011), and White, de Burgh, Fear, and Iversen (2011) have argued that multiple deployments increase the risks families experience. This is most likely due to the repeated feelings of grief and loss (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006) when families are still vulnerable and are less able to be resilient. This was evident in Family 1 who found the second deployment far more stressful for a number of reasons. Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, and Richardson (2010) stressed the need for increased assistance for families affected by multiple redeployments or longer deployments. In contrast, Lowe, Adams, Browne, and Hinkle (2012) and McGuire et al. (2012) found little difference between the impact of single and multiple deployments on families; however, McGuire et al. (2012) conceded that

parents tend to be increasingly negative about the effects of deployment on their children with multiple deployments. DeVoe and Ross (2012) described this as a common reaction of nondeployed parents who are dealing with the loss of their partner and the overwhelming “financial, household, and parenting responsibilities” (p. 186). Reinforcement is more readily available for families when they live on or close to the defense base (Brooks, 2011), which is particularly important for those without extended family nearby because access to parental support also affects the children. Flake et al. (2009) believed that parenting, resources, supports, and resilience influence children’s psychosocial functioning during the deployment cycle.

Sims (2002) outlined characteristics of strong families, including spending time together, encouraging individual growth within a cohesive unit, communication without blame or prejudice, supporting each other physically and emotionally, working together to cope and caring for one another. Walsh (2003) discussed the key processes in family resilience as the ability of a family to make sense of difficulties along with adaptability, interconnectivity, attitude, shared problem solving, and healthy emotional expression. These abilities are diminished when multiple and ongoing stressors overwhelm the family, increasing their susceptibility to further problems (Walsh, 2003). Within ADF families, constant comings and goings of parents due to training episodes can cause this type of ongoing, spasmodic family disruption and along with deployment, can increase family stress (Pincombe & Pincombe, 2010). The returned parent’s needs are heightened by anxiety about the reunion and reintegration. Many experience a sense of being no longer needed, nor part of the family. Others fear rejection that may lead to more serious reintegration issues (Palmer, 2008). Seb, within Family 3, demonstrated some of these issues during integration. An understanding and supportive spouse can help alleviate many of these issues, as evidenced in the data.

*Professional relationships with educators and teachers.* Belonging, Being, Becoming, *The Early Years Learning Framework* for Australia (EYLF; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) outlines the importance of genuine partnerships between families and educators to achieve the best learning outcomes for children by valuing each other’s knowledge and efforts and collaborating in decision making. Elliott (2014) recommended building this type of trusting relationship based on the sociocultural assumptions those families’ diverse cultures; experiences and family traditions are esteemed and appreciated. In this study, all families expressed their desire for educator support, input, and suggested strategies.

In Family 2, Wendy had more difficulty building this type of relationship with Michael’s first primary schoolteacher, and this affected the provision of additional school assistance. She believed that Michael’s education suffered because of the difference of opinion about the need to access

funding to support his learning difficulties. The ecological framework positions the mesosystem in terms of relationships between different players within the microsystems: The greater the coherence between the players, the better the outcomes for Michael. This level of coherence and the relations between the players are framed as the mesosystem (Bowes, Grace, & Hayes, 2012). Specifically, there was a change over time (chronosystem) in the quality of the relationships between Wendy and Michael’s early childhood educator, then schoolteacher, with negative consequences for Michael.

Andres and Moelker (2011) described the difficulties a number of children face during the reintegration stage of the deployment cycle, due to their feeling separated and uncertain. Educators who have strong relationships with young children or are communicating with the family will be more likely to identify times of need and may be able to provide extra time to support during this vulnerable stage. They need to invest time to listen to the children and acknowledge their emotions, responding professionally and creating joint understandings (Nolan, Stagnitti, Taket, & Casey, 2014). Lowe et al. (2012) stressed the importance of addressing issues during this period to promote the long-term stability of the whole family unit. Sharing insightful dialogues with an early childhood professional to assist with family communication during this stressful reintegration period was very comforting for Fiona from Family 1. This type of communication with families is recognized as a crucial element in quality early childhood service delivery where educators and families reciprocate information in a respectful manner (DEEWR, 2009). For example, Gonzalez-Mena (2009) recommended that educators become knowledgeable about ways to support families’ connection with the community and help engage the assistance they need. In addition, educators can often be the link between families and support services (Arthur et al., 2015).

### *Protective Factors Within the Exosystem and Macrosystem*

Within this theme, several substrands are discussed, including the formal supports and various forms of communication.

*Formal supports (exosystem and macrosystem).* Within the exosystem, the ADF culture can be quite encouraging in many families during times of stress (Baber et al., 2015). In addition, Brooks (2011) stated that “families cope best if they accept the military lifestyle and see meaning in the sacrifices they make” (p. 496). In this study, Wendy from Family 2 also stated that she wanted her son Michael to understand this. Bowling and Sherman (2008) explained that creating a shared narrative can help bind families together and reduce stress. The content of these narratives demonstrates a high level of acculturation from the ADF and the wider community and Australian Government meta-narratives.

A number of charity organizations and Australian Government Departments assist military and veteran families. Similar experiences to Wendy's are identified by Cromptoets (2012) who raised issues of outdated models being used to deal with current veterans and their families, thus creating issues in accessing appropriate and effective provision, revealing a need for reform.

*Communication (macrosystem).* Within research with FIFO families, Meredith, Rush, and Robinson (2014) reported on the impact social networking sites can have as an "important mediating effect" (p. 15). Other war widows sharing their experiences of ADF counseling via social media may have influenced Wendy's decision not to use ADF counseling. Within the ADF, Siebler (2015) reported family members' experiences accessing the ADF's professional support staff who struggled to effectively listen to their concerns, empathize and build relationships that are essential in engendering trust and usage of such services. His findings recommended the use of digital communication technologies and social media as an opportunity to build upon assistance for ADF families in online communities (Siebler, 2015).

The availability of being able to send ADF-funded care packages helped Family 1 and Family 3 feel connected. Linke (2007) stated that care packages provide excitement when they arrive for the children, whereas for the deployed parent it can be encouraging having something familiar from home arriving at the base (Defence Community Organisation, 2013).

Along with letter writing, emails are thought to serve as a protective factor for families during deployment (Palmer, 2008). Families who made the effort to stay in touch were easing the way for the reintegration process because maintaining contact and regular communication kept relationships strong and fresh, potentially relieving feelings of loneliness and loss, and reducing stress. Family 1 also involved the children in this process, sharing artwork and captions. Such opportunities to share special moments, emotions, and reaffirm love and care also help maintain relationships (Defence Community Organisation, 2014) highlighting the importance of ADF-supplied communication technologies for the deployed parent.

Bartone (2015) rationalized other defense force's extensive funding of video-conferencing communication services for deployed forces to increase morale and mitigate stress. Within Family 1, Fiona's frustrations of nightly Skype™ sessions with Caleb reflect the increasingly crowded and stressful family life associated with managing dual careers and family responsibilities described by Poole (2005). In defense families, De Angelis and Segal (2015) described this conflict, stating "Military families, . . . exist at the intersection of two major social institutions that make great, often competing, demands on their time, energy and loyalty" (p. 22). In line with the revelations from the data, military families are encompassed by a culture of service and sacrifice that

features heavily in the justification of the regime, legitimizing the gender inequities (Eran-Jona, 2015).

### *Limitations of the Study*

While various themes have emerged during data analysis, the study represents only three families from defense forces in Australia. While every effort was made to reduce researcher bias, the narrative methodology including interview questions and interpretation of secondary data about the children was open to my understandings. As a researcher, I am not from a military family. This may be beneficial, being able to detect detailed nuances of the culture and the acculturation processes; however, Chandra and London (2013) indicated that this may also limit the understanding of the defense culture.

### **Conclusion**

This study acknowledges and identifies the stressors of having a parent who works away, especially in defense families. De Angelis and Segal (2015) described both the military and the family itself as greedy institutions who have undergone enormous change over the past decades, increasing the conflicting interests between them. Outdated models of deployment still place family responsibility onto the nondeploying spouse who is generally juggling their own career and family responsibility (De Angelis & Segal, 2015) while often isolated from their extended family. Despite deployment being taxing and testing for families (Siebler, 2015), a number of protective factors were identified for the three families in this study. These protective factors came from the microsystem, including within the families themselves, in the extended family and friend network and from educators. Protective factors were also identified within the exosystem through the ADF provisions and community organizations and within the macrosystem through Australian Government Departments and social media. Communication tools and technology also provided a medium for many of these provisions. By utilizing these protective factors, the families were showing varying degrees of resilience. All identified protective factors were acknowledged as important to assist defense families cope with the deployment cycle and even after the death of a family member. Although not all families utilized all available supports, it can be reassuring to know assistance is available (Baber et al., 2015). Importantly, these protective factors form a vital buffer for the children and families during the stresses of deployment cycle, therefore reducing risk factors. The well-being of military children is important, and understanding which protective factors are valued and effective may increase our capacity to support these potentially vulnerable families. These findings can inform the ADF: policy makers, social workers, Regional Education Liaison Officers (REDLOs), and others who support military families such as counselors and educators. Further research into

these protective factors is crucial; hence, assistance can be targeted and effective for military children and families.

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## Author Biography

**Marg Rogers-Baber** works as a researcher and early childhood education lecturer at the University of New England, Australia. Her PhD research explores young children within military families. Other current research includes family, cultural and health narratives, technology and creative arts in early childhood.