

READ TO ME: THE IMPACTS OF PARTICIPATION IN UNITED THROUGH READING
ON MILITARY MEMBERS, CHILDREN, AND SPOUSES

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United Through Reading (UTR) is a non-profit organization that provides the tools for military service members to take videos of themselves reading books so that when they must leave their family for training, deployment, temporary duty (TDY), or other military induced separations, their family gets a copy of the video recording and a copy of the book. Although UTR developed their program supported by research about the academic benefits of being read aloud to as a child, the importance of developing a love of reading, the impacts of deployment on military youth, and the impacts of service on children's academics before this research began, they had not yet conducted an evaluation of their specific program. To this end, this research sought to understand how participation in UTR impacts 1) a child's love of reading, 2) child behavior, 3) morale and stress levels for service members and caregivers, and 4) service members' retention or re-enlistment in the military. To address these questions this study utilized a mixed methodological approach, combining participant observation at UTR recording events, interviews ($n = 19$), and surveys ($n = 58$). UTR was found to improve and reinforce children's love of reading, improve child behavior, increase morale and decrease stress for service members and caregivers, and indirectly impact retention and re-enlistment in the military. This research is positioned to help UTR advertise their program to more effectively reach service members and their families, frame their work when talking to beneficiaries and funders, and be more competitive when applying for grants to fund their continued operations.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CO	Commanding Officer
DoD	Department of Defense
FRG	Family Readiness Group
PCS	Permanent Change of Station
TDY	Temporary Duty Assignment
USO	United Services Organization
UTR	United Through Reading

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF APPLIED THESIS PROJECT

United Through Reading

United Through Reading (UTR) is a non-profit organization that provides the tools for military service members to take videos of themselves reading books so that when they must leave their family for training, deployment, temporary duty (TDY), or other military induced separations, their family gets a copy of the video recording and a copy of the book. There are several means for service members to make these recordings, both before or during a military induced separation. UTR has semi-permanent recordings stations at many command installations overseas, as well as on many Navy ships. Additionally, UTR has a “Mobile Story Station”, which is a van with a selection of books and recording equipment that can drive to events where service members will be. UTR staff and volunteers also go to yellow ribbon events for the Air Force and Army National Guard and Reserves. These events are held for service members and their families both before and after a deployment and are geared towards teaching families what to expect and showing them the resources available to them. In addition to these, just before this research began UTR released a new app, where service members can record videos on their own devices. Rather than a physical copy of the recording (such as an SD card), families receive a link via e-mail to download the video.

UTR was founded 30 years ago by Betty J. Mohlenbrock. When her husband returned from deployment in the Vietnam War, their young daughter didn't recognize him, and it resulted in a long and difficult reintegration process and much heartache. As a reading specialist, Betty knew the power of reading aloud to children, and was determined that no military family should have to experience the same challenges her and her family did. She took a video camera to her

local Naval unit and filmed them reading stories before they went out to sea in order to support military families and promote military child education. UTR as an organization was officially founded in 1989 and has since served 2.4 million military family members. Over the course of their operation, UTR has expanded their focus from service members' children, to any child in a service member's life - be it their own child, a niece/nephew, younger sibling, neighbor, god child, etc. UTR also serves military caregivers: any adult who is taking care of the children a UTR recording gets sent to.

I became connected to UTR through Carol Macrander, a close family friend and the Director of Grant Development at UTR. Carol is a military spouse, whose husband retired from the Air Force as a Wing Commander after 34 years of service. Knowing that I wanted to do research in the non-profit sector, I e-mailed Carol asking if she knew of a database of non-profit organizations that I could reach out to. She gave me the resource, but also told me that UTR needed research done in several areas. As a military child myself, I was interested in doing research in service to military families, and I eagerly agreed to have Carol put me in contact with Kara Dallman, the Senior Director of Development and Strategic Alliances. Kara served as my point of contact with UTR for the duration of this project. My project proposal was reviewed and approved by all of the lead staff members. Through the course of my research I served as both researcher and advocate: I interviewed and surveyed military families, but I also worked as a volunteer at recording events in Utah and Texas. Additionally, in July 2019 UTR invited me to attend the Military Child Education Coalition Annual Training Seminar with them in Washington D.C., where I was able to connect with military leaders and review emerging research in the field of military child and family wellbeing. After presenting the findings of this research to UTR staff, I offered to continue to be available to answer follow up questions and

present the research at any future venues. I also intend to continue to serve as a volunteer for UTR at local recording events.

Research Overview

Although UTR developed their program supported by research about the academic benefits of being read aloud to as a child, the importance of developing a love of reading, the impacts of deployment on military youth, and the impacts of service on children's academics when I reached out to them, they had not yet conducted an evaluation of their specific program. To this end, they sought to understand:

1. Does participation in UTR impact a child's love of reading?
2. Does participation in UTR impact child behavior?
3. Does participation in UTR impact morale and stress levels for military members and caregivers?
4. Does participation in UTR impact military members' retention or re-enlistment in the military?

This research was informed by two main theoretical perspectives: 1) Foucault's Panopticon, to describe military culture and contextualize the program within it, and 2) positive psychology, to the mechanisms by which this program helps families. Foucault's Panopticon describes the mechanisms for creating a cultural norms system where individuals discipline themselves and each other. This is particularly useful when trying to understand and describe military culture, not only for service members, but also the influences that the military as an institution has on the service member's family. Understanding these influences and how they operate within a Foucauldian framework emerges as critical to understanding how UTR is positioned as an effective program. Because UTR was founded by military families, for military families, and is currently staffed by military spouses, it is uniquely situated to function within,

rather than against, military culture. Because UTR strengthens a families' toolkit for maintaining connection and communication with their service member, the program helps to prevent negative outcomes rather than mediating them once they occur. This positions the program within the framework of positive psychology, where positive attributes are strengthened in order to buffer against negative outcomes, rather than try to correct symptoms once they occur.

Understanding how military culture operates within the framework of Foucault's panopticon helps understand why UTR is an effective program for military families. UTR functions within a framework of positive psychology; the program helps strengthen families' already existing skills in order to promote readiness and resiliency amidst frequent military induced separations.

Foucault's theories surrounding discipline and punishment within the panopticon were chosen as the foundational theoretical framework over others for several reasons. I conducted an extensive review of the literature and I found no works within Anthropology of the Military that addressed families and children, which are at the core of this thesis. And because the families in this study use UTR as a means of connection rather than education, despite the act of reading being central, Anthropology of Education didn't seem to apply in a relevant fashion either. Autoethnography, another framework that could have worked, focuses on the positionality of a researcher within their own culture. However, although I was a military child, I did not participate in UTR myself. As such, all my insider knowledge pertains only to that of military culture and not my analysis. Because autoethnography did not contribute to the ultimate analysis or conclusions of this research I did not use it either. Additionally, I looked into including Anthropology of Resilience as a means of connecting anthropology to positive psychology

theory, but the two terms do not match in how they are defined. Resiliency in positive psychology is used to describe inner strength to face challenges, whereas what I was reading in the anthropological literature used resiliency to describe recovery in the face of disaster. Ultimately, I utilized Foucault's theories to define military culture and contextualize the research within that definition, thus using Foucault and military culture as my anthropological frame. This is a unique framework for understanding the roles and interactions of family and children within the military institution.

UTR wanted their deliverables for this project to come in two forms. The first was a white paper and the second was a slide deck. Both of these covered an overview of the research, with an emphasis on important findings and action items for them to use. After I sent the deliverables to them, we scheduled a conference call where I presented the research findings to the staff, focusing on the qualitative data and how the project could be useful to them. The staff had an incredibly positive reaction to these deliverables, and spent a portion of the conference call discussing what, to them, were the important research highlights, how to implement the research moving forward, and asking specific questions. This research is positioned to help them advertise their program to more effectively reach service members and their families, frame their work when talking to beneficiaries and funders, and be more competitive when applying for grants to fund their continued operations.

This chapter has provided an introduction to the services UTR provides and their history, a broad overview of the research, and has provided context for my relationship with UTR. Chapter 2 will provide an introduction to the US military structure and culture, with a particular emphasis on how military culture functions within a Foucauldian framework, and the tension between the demands of the military and the demands of the family on a service member.

Chapter 3 provides a more in depth look at the impacts of military service on families and children, both broadly and during the deployment cycle. Although these impacts often seem overwhelmingly negative, this chapter also looks at the benefits of military service on families, and the ways in which families build resiliency in a positive psychology framework. Chapter 4 reviews the research methods utilized in this research, and Chapter 5 presents the research findings, qualitative and quantitative, as well as the suggestions that participants had and a review of the deliverables prepared for UTR. Chapter 6 frames the current research within the broader literature on military families and culture, and concludes that UTR has a positive impact on a child's love of reading, child behavior, and service member and caregiver stress and morale, as well as an indirect impact on service member retention and re-enlistment in the military. I also include a reflection on my own positionality as a military child during this research process.

CHAPTER 2

MILITARY CULTURE

Military culture is growing increasingly separated from civilian culture (Shiffer et al. 2017; Coll, Weiss, and Yarvis 2011). In some cases this is described as a “different planets” feeling where military members may feel alienated from civilians: “All the patriotism feels a little bit alienating, coming from people who did nothing but wave a flag” (Henderson 2006, 299). This stems partly from the fact that the majority of families do not feel that civilians understand the sacrifice military families make, or that the sacrifice is borne by all members of a family, not just the soldier (Sonethavilay et al. 2018). In light of this, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a background about the structure of the military and military culture. Although brief, this overview is aimed at helping readers familiarize themselves with the context that this research was conducted within. I provide a short overview of military structure, including the different branches, the types of commissions service members can hold, and different forms of activation status. I then discuss some of the reasons why service members choose to join the military, and the impacts that the abolition of the draft has had on the services as a whole.

I then provide an analysis of military culture within a Foucauldian framework. Foucault’s theory of the Panopticon is useful for understanding the interactions between service members, their families, and the military as an institution. Understanding these interactions is critical to understanding how service members approach and relate to service providers such as UTR.

Overview of the United States Military

The United States Armed Forces consist of five distinct military branches: The Army, the Air Force, the Marines, the Navy, and the Coast Guard. Although many civilians think of the

U.S. military as a combat force, the branches are engaged in a variety of missions from combat to peacekeeping, such as disaster relief and medical missions (Kizer and Menestrel 2019). Within each of the branches, service members can be enlisted, non-commissioned officers (NCOs), or officers. Enlisted service members have the lowest rank and pay and generally serve shorter time commitments. However, they can also choose to re-enlist when their time is up or receive more schooling and become an officer. Officers are required to have at least a bachelor's degree, and the lowest ranking officer still outranks the highest-ranking enlisted service member. In between the two are the NCOs. These service members are enlisted personnel who have distinguished themselves as technical specialists in their area of expertise. They are still considered enlisted personnel and are outranked by the officers, but they have a higher rank than all other enlisted. The Army has an additional rank - warrant officer - which is situated above an NCO but below the officers.

Within each branch there are both active duty and reserve components. Active duty personnel are full-time employees of the Department of Defense (DoD) and for them the military is their full-time job. Reservists have full-time civilian jobs, but spend at least one weekend a month in training exercises (called "drill weekends") and can spend several weeks a year in training. Additionally, they can be brought to active status (called activation) at any point in time, wherein they begin to serve the military full time. This can either occur for an overseas deployment, or when the military needs them to fill a full-time position vacated by someone who had been deployed. Legally, employers are required to hold a job for these individuals while they are unable to attend work due to military assignment. There are three different reserve categories: ready reserve, who may be recalled to assist active forces, standby reserve, "whose civilian jobs are considered key to national defense or who may have a temporary disability or

personal hardship and therefore not called into active duty”, and retired reserve, who are former officers and enlisted who do not receive pay until their retirement pay begins at age 60 (Hall 2008, 130).

Additionally, both the Army and the Air Force have National Guard components. National Guard members swear oaths to both the nation and the state they live in. In peacetime they are commanded by the state governor. They have the authority to help during national disasters, state emergencies, and they are the only military force that can be called in during times of civil unrest (Hall 2008). Similarly to reservists, National Guard members have civilian jobs and although they have military training monthly and yearly, they do not serve in a military capacity full-time unless they are "activated". Like reservists, they can be activated to serve in military conflicts overseas and serve tours of duty equal in length to active duty personnel.

Historically, there have been several key shifts in the demographics and policies of the U.S. military. Although African Americans had served in every major U.S. conflict, the armed forces were segregated from the Civil War until the World War II, and the desegregation process lasted until the Korean War (McGuire 1983; Butler 1992). Prior to the Vietnam War, the United States kept a standing armed force, but supplemented their ranks during war time with the draft. Following the end of the Vietnam War, the U.S. transitioned to an all-volunteer force. This changed the demographic of the military force from primarily unmarried men to young couples and families (Schneider and Martin 1994). The Vietnam War had other repercussions on the demographic of the U.S. fighting force. The highly controversial nature of this war led to those of the elite using college as a means of deferring their draft and not participating in war efforts. To this day, the military is primarily made up of individuals from a middle or lower working class background (Hall 2008). Despite the high ratio of middle and lower class individuals,

inside the armed forces rank plays a larger role in social structure than an individual's race or social status prior to joining. This results in the military being the great equalizer between race and class, and many may see it as a way toward social upward mobility (Hall 2008, 2011; Wertsch 1991). Sergeant First Class Melvin Morris, Medal of Honor recipient, stated that, “the military has a way of life” especially when you do not have much going for you. “Going into the military gave me a life”, he said, and helped him get his high school GED and his associate’s degree, even though he dropped out of high school in 8th grade (2019). Although originally passed after World War II as an anti-depression model, the G.I. Bill is seen by many as a benefit provided for veterans, giving them means to further their education after their service that they may otherwise not have had (Olson 1973). Aside from upward mobility, the military can also provide recruits with a means of escape from their family or civilian lives (Wertsch 1981; Hall 2008)

Some individuals join the military because of a family history of service (Wertsch 1991; Hall 2008; Blaise 2005). Indeed, in one DoD school, 10-15% of the students each year indicated that they planned to go into the military as well (Hall 2008). However, over the past several years, military parents have reported at an increased rate that they would not wish for their children to serve (Schiffer et al. 2017). This does not stop military raised children and some join despite their parents discouraging them from "carrying on the military tradition" (Hall 2008, 35). Another common reason for service is patriotism, or an intrinsic desire to serve (Sonethavilay et al. 2018; Wertsch 1981; Blaise 2005). However, this was more common in the past than it is now. Educational benefits are now the number one reason why millennials join the military, as opposed to “desire to serve” which was the top reason for older service members and veterans. Within the millennial generation there is also a gender difference: women tend to join for

education benefits while men join for retirement benefits (Sonethavilay et al. 2018). Today, women comprise 16.5% of active duty service members, and 20% of the reserves. Nearly a third (31.0%) of active duty service members and 26.1% of reservists identify themselves as an ethnic minority. Enlisted personnel tend to have had less education than officers: 75.6% of enlisted reservists and 80.5% of enlisted active duty service members have a high school diploma, while 88% of reserve and 84.8% of active duty officers have a bachelor's degree or higher (Department of Defense 2018).

Overall, national military participation has declined in every major conflict since World War II (Hall 2008). In fact, only 0.5% of the American population has served on active duty at any point since 9/11 (Sonethavilay et al. 2018). Since 2001 we have been in 19 years of continuous war. Because only 0.5% of United States citizens serve in the military, only 3% of the country are part of an immediate military family. That means that only 3% of the population are bearing the brunt of 19 years of war (Carol Macrander, personal communication, August 13, 2019). The implications of this is that service members are deploying more. Where once a service member may have deployed twice, now they may deploy 10-15 times. That means that over the course of a military child's life they may see that parent less and less and in more and more stressful situations. This creates family dynamics and experiences that are unheard of in civilian populations, and contributes to the uniqueness of military culture.

A critical aspect of every branch of the military, and one that is pivotal to this thesis, are deployments. A "deployment is a temporary (3- to 15- month) movement of an individual or military unit away from his or her local work site, resources, and family to accomplish a task or mission" (Siegel and Davis 2013, 3). Deployments are common in the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. The Coast Guard does not typically deploy; however, they currently have an

ongoing mission in Southwest Asia and can be called to augment the Navy in times of war.

Although many people consider deployments a wartime-only occurrence, deployments can also happen during peacetime (Siegal and Davis 2013, Park 2011). Shorter separations between military members and their families due to training and irregular work hours are also common during both war and peace, and training exercises carry their own inherent set of risks (Park 2011). “Soldiers get injured or killed in training accidents... A big sign by Fort Campbell’s front gate tracks the number of fatalities in a year, along with the number of days the post has gone without an accident. The soldiers are rewarded with extra days off when they go a certain number of days without a fatal accident” (Blaise 2005, 85).

From 2001-2015, 2,774,000 people deployed as part of the US Military. Approximately 10% of these were women, 45% of them had children, and 57% of them were married. Of special note, the Army made up 58% of the total deployments (Wenger, O’Connell, and Cottrell 2018). Lowering this occupational tempo is desired by many families, but this is difficult because it requires more recruits to share the burden of deployment, and the Army failed to meet its recruitment goals this year (Sonethavilay et al. 2018). Recently, the National Guard and the Reserves have been activated more than ever before, leading to a higher rate of deployment among these service members. (Kizer and Menestrel 2019). This background information serves as the basis for understanding military culture as a whole.

Military Culture

Ever since the initiation of an all-volunteer force, military members are not representative of larger society and identify less with "normative culture" (Martin and McClure 2000). Instead military culture is distinct from that which civilians experience. “The term *culture* has multiple meanings when used in reference to the military. Service members and families are influenced

in various ways by military culture, diverse unit cultures, and the cultures surrounding their bases” (Drummet, Coleman, and Cable 2003, 283). Some scholars would caution against stating that the military has a single culture that encompasses all the branches. And that is true; each branch of the military has its own very unique culture – and a strong rivalry with the other branches (it is not uncommon to hear the Air Force called the “chair force” by soldiers in the Army, due to a perception that airmen sit around all day and do not do any real work). However, although “each branch of the military has a unique set of core values, there are unifying qualities across the various divisions of the military such as honor, courage, loyalty, integrity, and commitment” (Coll, Weiss, and Yarvis 2011, 489). Beyond a set of core values, every branch of the military shares other cultural commonalities: each branch has 1) normalized behavior and interactions between military members, their families, and service providers, 2) a shared knowledge that the “mission” always comes first, 3) an institutionalized rank system that gets conveyed onto military spouses and children, 4) push and pull factors on the service member between their family and the military, 5) support structures within the military institution that help to facilitate community, and 6) a lifestyle characterized by frequent moves and unpredictable and lengthy separations within families. Key to understanding the first of these points - normalized behavior and interactions - is Foucault's theory of the panopticon. Foucault was selected because it is a unique framework for understanding military culture and particularly the roles of family and children within this culture. This is particularly important because the normalization of behaviors and interactions between military members and their families impacts many of the other aspects of military culture, particularly the mission first mentality, the institutionalization of the rank system, and the push and pull factors that service members experience.

Foucault's Panopticon

Foucault's theory of discipline and punishment can help navigate how culture is created through a collective disciplining of individuals. Within a panopticon, microphysics of power and cellular power together create an instrumental coding of the body, where an individual may act without thinking in a manner that contributes to the functioning of the whole. Cellular power simply means that every individual is separate and identifiable, in a process that “individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” that allows them to communicate between one another (Foucault 1995, 146). So although every individual is a separate unit that makes it easy for them to be identified and assessed, they are not partitioned in such a way that eliminates communication.

Individuals use microphysics of power to discipline other individuals in the network over the smallest fragments of life. These things are seemingly mundane, insignificant, or innocuous: "it was a question not of treating the body, *en masse*, ‘wholesale’, as if it were an indissociable unity, but of working it ‘retail’, individually; of exercising upon it a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body" (Foucault 1995, 136-137). The discipline itself is often subtle, and through this disciplining - not by a central power, but by other individuals in the network - an individual learns actions that are considered normal and those become habit.

This “power of the Norm appears through disciplines...It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish” (Foucault 1995, 184). If individuals did not have a category for what is "not normal" they would not have anything to judge appropriate actions. We only redefine the "rules" of a system by understanding someone or something as having broken them. However, it is important to not frame these pressures as

negative: “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces. It produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (194). This is the invention of reality. Culture is something that individuals do unconsciously, it is regular, it is patterned, it is communal/collective, and culture is defined by what is appropriate (rules) as much as it defines it. Culture is normalized, and that is what makes culture the reality.

Discipline and punishment within the panopticon, then, enforce realities or alternative cultures. Within each culture the categories that are “normal” and those that are marginalized become enforced through microphysics of power and cellular power; individuals discipline one another, and that discipline creates a normalized reality that defines what is mainstream. A panopticon implies the possibility of being watched, so much so that the individual begins to watch themselves unconsciously (self surveillance). And all that is created through a power that is exercised by the individuals, on the individual, so that they are both surveyor and surveyed.

Central to this theory is efficiency. There does not *need* to be a constant surveillance by an institution because the system works so efficiently that individuals surveil *themselves*. When individuals act out of the norm, other people within the network (cellular power) use disciplining mechanisms to either correct actions, reinforce the habit of actions, or punish or eliminate the individual (instrumental coding of the body), which helps define what the marginal/status quo is for other individuals in the system. The individual surveilling themselves is central to understanding the panopticon. It is not about actually being watched; it is about the possibility of being watched so individuals monitor themselves. Observance by others within the panopticon is always visible but unverifiable.

Michel Foucault uses military training as an example of prototypical institutional

discipline throughout his book *Discipline & Punish*, particularly concerning the military unit as a whole and how military members are trained. For example, in terms of the unit, these mechanisms ensure that the group of individuals become "a sort of machine with many parts, moving in relation to one another, in order to arrive at a configuration and to obtain a specific result" (Foucault 1995, 162), so that when a command is issued "the order does not need to be explained or formulated; it must trigger off the required behavior and that is enough... it is a question not of understanding the injunction but of perceiving the signal and reacting to it immediately" (Foucault 1995, 166). Although these principles are integral to the physical training of military personnel, the theory behind the panopticon extends into every aspect of military life - for both service members and their families - creating the military culture. The institutionalization of how to behave and the discipline of that behavior creates a culture that is uniquely military. Essentially a military base is its own world with its own culture and its own rules. Because of this, for any program seeking to address problems related to military families to be effective, the program must operate within this military culture.

Describing Military Culture

Values and the Mission First Mentality

The first aspect of military culture that can be described through this Foucauldian framework is the values and ideals that are instilled in each member and define what the "ideal" soldier is: honor, sacrifice, the importance of the mission, courage, bravery, pride, perseverance, readiness, and strength (Hall 2011, Fenell 2008, Ulio 1941, Reger et al. 2008). Many of these values are specifically mentioned in the songs for each branch. "The Marine's Hymn" specifically references pride, honor, and readiness, and implies courage and bravery in the line "in many a strive we've fought for life and never lost our nerve" (Offenbach 1942). In "The

Army Goes Rolling Along” the lyrics specifically reference pride, bravery, as well as perseverance (Arberg 1956). “Anchors Aweigh” (Navy) cites courage, service, and honor, as well as perseverance (Hagan 1997). Even the most upbeat of all of the service branch songs “The U.S. Air Force”, asserts that the airmen will “live in fame or go down in flame”, and that nothing will stop them, again emphasizing values of pride, courage, sacrifice, and perseverance (Crawford 1939). These songs, which are sung often at military gatherings, help define the values and expectations for the groups in a subtle way, teaching military members and their families through something seemingly benign - a song – the actions that are expected of them. These values are instilled in members through the ways that the military branches are portrayed (i.e. “The few, the proud, the Marines”) and through rites of passage such as boot camp and officer training. This is incredibly effective. “The concept of honor is so ingrained that officers have no need to enforce it, because the service members themselves enforce honor” (Hall 2008, 61). Historically, “in most battles of the Civil War, where the chances of being wounded or killed were extraordinarily high, the soldiers continued to enthusiastically march directly into fire, lest any faltering be seen as dishonorable. The officers didn’t need to hold a gun to their backs to get them to do what they did. Thus, given the choice between death and dishonor, many military men would choose death, and quite frequently do” (Hall 2008, 62). This encompasses the cultural ideals to go the distance, work through the pain, and even die for the unit, and are incredibly Foucauldian in nature: the military members were not being forced to act in accordance with the values of the military; they chose police themselves.

Two of these values are particularly important to this project: the "mission first mentality" and personal strength (Hall 2011; Fenell 2008; Reger et al. 2008). These result in “making sure the mission and the unit always come before the individual.... [and] never showing

weakness to fellow warriors or to the enemy” (Hall 2011, 12). Here, the value of strength leads to the importance of not showing weakness, not only to the enemy, but also to the rest of the unit. This will be elaborated on in more detail in Chapter 3, but for military members weakness in an individual is seen as impacting the performance of the entire unit. In a Foucauldian sense, because the success of the unit depends upon every individual doing their part, weakness on the part of an individual is a liability that impacts the functioning of the whole. Therefore, showing weakness is addressed through the disciplining mechanisms of correction, punishment, or elimination. This creates a stigma against showing weakness, which leads some military members to hide injuries or mental health problems from their peers and superiors (Fenell 2008; Reger et al. 2008). Ultimately this results in a strong theme of stoicism (the appearance that everything is okay, even when it is not) and denial (of feelings, fears, and stressors) in the military - not just for the military member but for their spouse and children as well (Wertsch 1991).

The military exercises “direct constraints on families through normative pressures on the behavior of spouses and children” (Segal 1986, 22). Thus, spouses and children "are expected to be as committed to the military lifestyle and mission as is the military member. Family member dedication is expected of a career military family. Active spousal and family member involvement in the culture is interpreted as a sign of commitment and adaptation to military life" (Knox and Price 1999, 129). Within this, families are often considered responsible to not do anything that would reflect badly on their military member (Hall 2008). In the past, both the actions of family members, and the use of mental health, physical health, and counseling services have been incorporated into the service member's record; a record that directly impacted their qualifications for promotion. In fact, service providers were required to report service use to the

service member's commanding officer (CO). Thus, the hierarchy of rank was reinforced because only the individuals who were deemed the most "ideal" were promoted.

These requirements are no longer in place. However, the current military has a "perception of zero-defect in both duty and personal life environments" (Hall 2008, 30). Although the practice of reporting use of services to superiors has been officially banned in all branches of the military, military families still exhibit caution out of concern that their actions will impact their military member's career (Hall 2008; Military Child Education Coalition 2019; United Service Organizations, INC 2018; Kizer and Menestrel 2019). Although unrelated to the service member, spouses today still feel worry about seeking mental health services for themselves because they believe it could impact their service member. Some have also commented that they feel that seeking mental health services for themselves feeling like stepping into the spotlight and that this threatens the mission first mentality (United Service Organizations, Inc 2018).

Beyond the use of family services, there are clearly defined expectations of the roles spouses play within the military culture. The military as an institution expects spouses to manage all domestic affairs while their spouse is gone, something that takes some off guard when they join (United Service Organizations, INC 2018). There is also a challenge when these expectations conflict with broader American gender roles, particularly evident with male spouses (United Service Organizations INC 2018; Henderson 2006). However, as more and more women seek professional careers, female spouses also experience challenges associated with a conflict between military and career expectations. There are also expectations that come with military promotions, with higher rank conveying larger responsibilities on the part of the spouse (Segal 1986; Wertsch 1991; United Service Organizations, Inc 2018). Although like family

behavior and family services visits this practice has been officially discontinued, the participation of spouses in expected duties and institutional groups such as spousal support networks also reflected on military members in the past (Segal 1986, Rosen and Durand 2003). Participation in the spousal support networks integrates spouses into a military social network with its own obligations, representing an informal socialization processes for wives and families (Segal 1986).

Ellyn Dunford, a long time military spouse, spoke at the Military Child Education Coalition Annual Training Seminar about the defined expectations of what a commander's wife's responsibilities were. Whenever she fell short of these expectations, either due to her own career or because she prioritized her children, other spouses told her what she should be doing (2019). This is an example of correction as a mechanism of power within Foucault's theory of the panopticon. Ellyn went on to explain that although she recognized the pressures to conform to the same role that her predecessor had held, she often paved her own path. This is becoming more and more common among spouses as they prioritize their own careers over the pressures and duties associated with being married to the military. In their review of military spouses, the United Service Organizations (2018) quoted a spouse who recalled feeling selfish for not being willing to give up everything for the military. The shift of military spouses towards a resistance against military normalization pressures supports Bourdieu's theory that individuals are not simply acted upon by cultural influences; they must strategize their actions within a known set of "rules" (Moore 2012). However, the latter spouse's feelings of selfishness indicate that the mechanisms of power that act to discipline individuals that do not conform are still fully acting upon her.

The pressures and expectations of how to behave carries over into how spouses act in

public. Kristen Henderson, a Navy spouse, recalls that she "carried my anxiety into the shower where no one would hear my cry it out of my system so I could get on with my day" (2006, 132). At another point in the same book she describes a time when she met another military wife whose spouse was deployed: "Tears suddenly welled our eyes. We both ran a careful finger along the lower edge of each eye, to wipe the tears without smearing the makeup. We were at a cocktail party. You don't burst into tears at cocktail parties" (2006, 4). Stoicism becomes a norm of military culture, where "stoic behavior is rewarded, whereas emotionality is not only discouraged but often punished" (Hall 2008, 57). One of the ways that discipline is enforced is through shaming and loss of face (Hall 2008). Parents also instill these values in their children in a similar Foucauldian manner: "fathers – and often mothers – reward stoic behavior with approval and respect, while emotional behavior is heavily discouraged, if not punished" (Wertch 1991, 42).

Rank

Rank is another iconic feature of military culture, which creates "distinct groups with unique roles and corresponding power" (Reger et al. 2008, 25). In many ways rank is a way to enact cellular power within the military setting: officers and enlisted are divided, often physically and culturally. This ensures that individuals who are of higher rank have a greater ability to observe and identify the individuals below them. Every single member of the military is accountable to another military member in some way. NCOs are often grouped with enlisted, but they exist in a grey area between enlisted personnel and officers due to their experience. Officially, the chain of command bottom to top is: enlisted, NCO, warrant officer, then officer. Military members have to be able to navigate between rank and experience, and when to defer to authority versus when to advise (Reger et al. 2008, Hall 2008).

Some military members find that they have difficulty expressing themselves to those either above them or below them in rank, so peer communication becomes key, especially in times of stress. Although there is still a stigma associated with seeking help from an institutional provider, there is not stigma associated with talking to friends (RAND 2006, Durham 2010). The lack of personal communication between enlisted and officers is also institutionalized. The military prohibits fraternization. While this is often used to describe sexual relationships between individuals, it also prohibits close friendships or partnerships that may jeopardize the chain of command, such as if an officer is too informal with enlisted personnel during off duty hours, which may impact their ability to command in theater. (Kizer and Menestrel 2019).

Captain Kate Blaise describes this interaction:

My tent was divided in half; the females slept in the back. The other staff officers were staying in the tent next door, but since I was the only woman, they put me with the enlisted women on staff. This made me the only officer in the entire tent. Soldiers need time away from their bosses, so the enlisted folk were less than thrilled to see me walking through every day. And I missed being able to kick back with my peers and discuss work issues in a casual, relaxed setting. (2005, 154)

Officers and enlisted personnel are not only divided in the theater. Military housing is also segregated based upon rank, creating a physical divide between them as well (Hall 2008). This expression of cellular power - the physical and social separation between the ranks of enlisted and officers - helps ensure that the military unit is able to function according to the instrumental coding of the body (i.e. without question or thought). General Ulio wrote that “Command and obedience here function, or fail to function, at the crucial point of military success or breakdown. This is the vital link to the chain of command. *As a fighting machine the body of the soldier must obey the will of the soldier. When the man commands himself to move he moves, with the other men in his unit, responding to leadership.*” (1941, 322, emphasis mine). Although written over 30 years before Foucault’s “Discipline and Punish”, the words are eerily

reminiscent of the “Body Weapon” (1995). The segregation of individuals based upon rank reinforces the hierarchy while simultaneously making more visible each individual. The formality in ascending ranks helps to ensure obedience and sustain the military unit in its ultimate function.

These divisions also extend beyond the military members: like other aspects of military culture, rank is also transferred to military spouses and children (Wertsch 1991; Drummet, Coleman, and Cable 2003, Segal 1986, Hall 2011; Schneider and Martin 1994; United Service Organizations, Inc 2018). Although informal, carrying rank "includes guidelines for behavior and pressure to conform" (Drummet, Coleman, and Cable 2003, 279). Military wives can be ranked not only based on the rank of their husbands, but also due to their number of years "serving" as a military spouse (Schneider and Martin 1994). The separation between officers and enlisted is also transferred to the spouses, and to the children (Hall 2011, Wertsch 1991). This divide for families is largely unspoken, and the rules are conveyed through behavior rather than through formalized institutions, and act that is inherently Foucauldian: “Almost no one I interviewed could recall a specific conversation in which a parent had forbidden them to associate with enlisted children – and yet all knew that this was law” (Wertsch 1991, 291). This separation sometimes impacts spouses' ability to make and maintain friends within the military community, especially when a promotion elevates an individual from “friend” to “the wing commander’s wife” (United Service Organizations, Inc 2018).

Rank plays a crucial role in the military, both in terms of unit functioning and in regards to the normalization of expectations and behaviors. Individuals who do not act within the defined “norm” are disciplined, and “disciplinary tactics [are] situated on the axis that links the singular and the multiple. It allows both the characterization of the individual as individual and

the order of a given multiplicity” (Foucault 1995, 149). By promoting individuals who best fit the norm, the norm is given greater value and spotlight. Additionally, by extending rank onto the military families, and by linking their behaviors to the success of the military member, it is the family unit as a whole that is promoted, not just the military member. This in turn places greater importance (and surveillance) on the actions of the military family, increasing the normalizing pressures, corrections, and disciplines and situating them within the larger system, which ultimately teaches and reinforces the military culture.

Greedy Institutions

This military culture and environment are “characterized by masculine norms which place high value on efficiency, hierarchy, dominance, power, and control of emotions. These norms are not always compatible with family life” (Segal and Harris 1993, 3). Both the military and families act as “greedy institutions”, which puts them at odds with one another. Greedy institutions “depend for their survival on the commitment of their members, for whose participation and loyalties they compete with each other and with other social groups” (Segal 1986, 10). The military demands incredible amounts of time from its members, including having their residence not separated from their place of work (living on-post), frequent separations from their families for deployment and training, and even death. Essentially, “the individual does not get to choose when and how to comply” with orders (Segal 1986, 12). This lack of choice can come as a surprise to families who are not familiar with military culture prior to joining. A spouse at the Military Child Education Coalition Annual Training Seminar commented that when her husband received orders to move away from Washington D.C., she argued, pointing out all the places in D.C. he could work instead. His response was, "Honey, they're called orders for a reason."

Supporting this, in one of her most highly quoted paragraphs, Wertsch points out that “the paradox of the military is that its members, the self-appointed front-line guardians of our cherished American democratic values, do not live in democracy themselves” (1991,15). The military is characterized by a rigid, authoritarian structure which can bleed into family life as well. The military can often come before the needs of the family, meaning “the family will always have a subsidiary role in the military environment” (Hall 2008, 47). However, families also demand the time of the service member in order to survive, and these often conflict with one another (Segal 1986). Especially when a sense of community or brotherhood is developed with the military, the soldier can form family bonds with his or her service mates. Conflict can occur when the military family is viewed as more important than the legal family (Hall 2008, 2011). Another big facet of military culture is the mission first mentality. The mission first mentality plays into the balance between these two institutions. “The family must take on this stance of the military that demands loyalty, dedication, dependency, and a sense of mission” (Hall 2008, 53). By ascribing social norms and behaviors according to rank, and defining the expectations of spouses and families that come with that rank, the military incorporates military families into a larger socializing system (Segal 1986). These structures and expectations integrate a family into the military system, while simultaneously helping to reinforce the “duty first” mentality among family members and military members.

The level of acculturation within the military may be different for different people in the military member’s family. This will be impacted by “component, by the individual family member’s history of service, that is, whether he or she is new to the military or early generations have served, and by demographic characteristics such as first language and racial, ethnic, and cultural background” (Kizer and Menestrel 2019, 2-12). Finally, military culture also encompass

“the beliefs and assumptions – both spoken and unspoken – held by most who chose this lifestyle, the fears, goals, and complications of living with long and frequent absences of one parent (or two in some cases) as well as the required frequent moves, and the more subtle lifestyle changes that military families must endure and, in most cases, survive with amazing resiliency and success” (Hall 2011, 5). The next chapter will outline these complications of living a military lifestyle, as well as the ways that military families foster resiliency.

CHAPTER 3

MILITARY FAMILIES

The previous chapter outlined a basic background on military structure and described how military culture operates within a Foucauldian framework on members and families. This chapter will focus on the psychological and physical impacts of the military lifestyle on families, with a special focus on the unique impacts on Reserve/National Guard families and military spouses. I will then review the literature describing the deployment cycle's (pre-deployment, deployment, and reintegration) effects on children, spouses, military members, and the family as a whole. Although the majority of this work has focused on the challenges that military families face, many families thrive exceedingly well and are proud of their service. In light of this, the chapter will then turn to theories surrounding resiliency and how military families cope and develop through military induced stressors.

Impacts of Service on Families

Intrinsic to the military lifestyle are frequent moves/relocations as well as long and often frequent periods of separation (Hall 2008; Abel 2004; Drummet, Coleman, and Cable 2003; Shiffer et al. 2017, 2018a; Reger et al. 2008). Although some would interpret these as inherent challenges, military scholars point out that not every individual is going to interpret military actions in the same way; a challenge for one person may be an opportunity for another. At the same time, something could be a challenge, an opportunity, and a stressor all at the same time. "Different individuals have different preferences. For example, some personnel may welcome the opportunity to deploy multiple times, while others may prefer never to deploy" (Kizer and Menestrel 2019, 4-3).

That isn't to say that military families don't face difficulties. In general, financial stressors

are becoming increasingly common among military families. They were the top stressor for families for the first time in the history of the Blue Star Families Lifestyle Report in 2018. More military families reported having trouble making ends meet than their civilian counterparts (13% vs 7%), although financial stress was in the top 5 stressors in 2017, and "military pay and benefits" have emerged as the top concern for military members and their families five times over the past 10 years of the Lifestyle Survey and have been mentioned in other reports as well (Shiffer et al. 2017, Sonethavilay et al. 2018, Blue Star Families 2018; Gottman, Gottman, and Atkins 2011; Military Family Advisory Network 2017). The frequency of permanent changes of station (PCS) have resulted in a rising concern over the out of pocket costs related to relocation, with families paying up to \$1000 out of pocket with each move (Sonethavilay et al. 2018).

Additionally, between long waiting lists, financial strain, and frequent moves, many families' childcare is also a consistent problem (United Service Organizations 2018; Sonethavilay et al. 2018; Henderson 2008). Henderson describes the situation well, saying: "More than 60 percent of military spouses work outside the home, and 6 percent of service members are single parents. They all face the problem of finding child care... for them, every time they move to a new assignment they're starting at zero in terms of who and what they know" (2008, 92).

The impacts of military service on children are also coming to the forefront of current military family discussion. In 2017, for the first time in the 9 year history of the survey, the impact of the military on children's well-being and the impact on their education ranked in the top 5 most concerning issues for military members and spouses in the Blue Star Families Lifestyle Survey, and this trend continued in 2018 (Shiffer et al. 2017, 2018a). Table 3.1 shows

the top deployment challenges for children and the percentage that reported experiencing them in 2017 and 2018.

Table 3.1

Youth Deployment Challenges

Challenge	2017	2018
Separation anxiety, worry, and sleep problems	54%	57%
Behavior problems (e.g. acting out, aggression, irritability)	49%	53%
Reintegration challenges upon deployed parent's return	28%	30%
Decreased academic performance or difficulty concentrating	18%	18%
Depression	13%	16%

Data from Shiffer et al. 2017, Sonethavilay et al. 2018

In fact, in 2017 parents reported more negative impacts of deployment than positive impacts on children (Shiffer et al. 2017). Although these impacts may be particularly prominent during long term deployments, it is incredibly important to recognize that “even in peacetime the absence of the military parent is a condition of military life; these military parents are continually leaving, returning, leaving again, or working such long hours that their children cannot count on their presence” (Hall 2008, 52). Additionally, in an effort to keep military families in a more stable environment for school or work, more and more families are turning to "geobatching", where the military parent will have a PCS to a new location, and their family will remain where they were, resulting in long spans of time where children and spouses are not in the same physical location as their military member. In 2018, 43% of military families chose this option over living together (Military Family Advisory Network 2018). These periods of geobatching, training, deployments, TDYs, and irregular work hours all qualify as what this thesis will refer to as “military induced separations.”

National Guard/Reserves

Although it is unlikely that National Guard or Reserve families will engage in geobatching, due to their primary jobs being located in the civilian sector, these families *are* increasingly affected by military induced separations. These families experience life differently than active duty families. Although they are deployed at a similar (if not higher) rate than active duty personnel (Kizer and Menestrel 2019), they often don't face the same relocation challenges of active duty personnel. However, while active duty families are often located near military installations with systems that support the military lifestyle, reservists are not so lucky. Many reserve families may not even be familiar with the resources available to them (Knox and Price 1999). Because of this geographic isolation, National Guard/Reserve families *can* be more vulnerable (Hall 2008; Henderson 2008). And when activated, Reserve and Guard families experience the same challenges as active duty families in regards to deployment, such as single parenting, financial strain, reintegration challenges, worry, etc. (Gottman, Gottman and Atkins 2011). While they may have less access to military support resources, they are also more likely to be located within a community that supports them, and closer to family and friends, which is something that on-base families suffer from (Henderson 2006). Reserve and National Guard families do best if the people in their community support them and know what's going on, since they don't have the same access to on-base support that active duty families do.

Large activations of the National Guard or Reserves, however, may impact smaller communities more than communities with a military base *because* these families are so integrated within their local geographic area. Sometimes families and communities may have the added stress of multiple service members leaving at the same time. This was experienced by

Captain Kate Blaise's father when she, her sister, and her husband were all deployed to Iraq at the same time (Blaise 2005).

When a National Guard or Reserve member is activated, they are sometimes called "suddenly military", because they are expected to transition from a civilian to a military member as soon as they receive their orders (Hall 2008). Yellow Ribbon education events, held by the Army and the Air Force, serve to help educate families about the resources available to them during their activation, as well as inform them on what they need to do to prepare for an upcoming deployment, and how best to reintegrate into civilian life when they come home. Despite this, activation can severely disrupt their civilian jobs, especially if the service member was self-employed. Although by law employers are required to hold an activated service member's job for them, "they still miss out on whatever promotions or pay increases they might have earned if they'd stayed" (Henderson 2008, 143). Along with this, there are significant differences between military pay and the pay they were receiving in their civilian job, which is usually lower during activation (Hall 2008; National Healthy Marriage Resource Center n.d; Henderson 2008).

Spouses

Similar to National Guard/Reserve military members, employment remains one of the biggest challenges for active duty spouses, specifically finding and maintaining employment (United Service Organizations 2018; Abel 2004; Sonethavilay et al. 2018; Southwell and Wadsworth 2016). Some experience discrimination in hiring because employers know they will be moving after a few years (United Service Organizations 2018). On top of this, professional licensure, such as teaching certifications, legal accreditation, and medical licenses, don't always transfer from state to state. Sometimes families will experience significant pay differences from

state to state, and spouses may not be able to find work at the same level they were at before, and have to start working up the ladder over again in a new company (United Service Organizations 2018; Sonethavilay et al. 2018). Spouse unemployment increases with the number of moves a family makes (Sonethavilay et al. 2018). The difficulties of spouses in finding work isn't just due to the frequent moves, however. It also includes the added time pressures of deployments, and the strict military schedule (a military member can't always leave work to pick a sick child up from school) (Henderson 2006). Due to the priority of the military as a greedy institution, the military member's job comes before that of the spouse (Segal 1986). Lack of work makes it hard for some to find meaning, and they may turn to volunteer work for a sense of purpose, despite not having any pay or benefits (United Service Organizations 2018).

Few military spouses are male; however, as more women join the military they are becoming more common. Male spouses also report challenges in finding a job, similar to women, as well as challenges in performing their wives' household tasks while they were gone (just like many civilian wives experience when their husbands deploy) (Southwell and Wadsworth 2016). Many perceive military support services and resources as being for women/wives only, and some report a stigma associated with accessing those resources. They express a feeling that they needed to "be a man", which shows that husbands also have to navigate conflicting gender roles (Southwell and Wadsworth 2016). Many, however, still stay active in their unit's family groups, and help the other wives while their husbands are away (Henderson 2008).

Despite these challenges, nearly all military spouses are proud of their role. "Spouses emerge as the backbone of the U.S. military community. This analogy is particularly appropriate when you imagine the many dimensions of a backbone. In the human body, the backbone is a

strong, rigid structure that keeps the body upright. At the same time the backbone is flexible and resilient, able to bend and stretch. And perhaps most telling, if the backbone is broken, a body can become paralyzed or die” (United Service Organizations 2018, 7).

Family Functioning in the Deployment Cycle

As was noted in the previous chapter, deployments (and other related long-term military induced separations) are a key aspect of the military lifestyle. Families engage with deployments before and after the actual separation occurs, and challenges can occur throughout this deployment cycle, affecting different members of the family at different times and in different ways. Pre-Deployment encompasses the time period between when a family is notified of a deployment to the time the military member leaves. For National Guard and Reserve families this may include extended training periods where the military member is away from their family but not yet in the operation theater (often called “spinning up”). Deployments themselves can last anywhere from 30 days to 18 months, and may or may not include short periods where the military member can return home. After a service member returns home from their deployment they face a re-integration period with their family, and for Reserve and National Guardsmen also a re-integration into civilian life. The following sections will review the challenges associated with each stage of the deployment cycle.

Pre-Deployment

Deployments play a significant factor in military family life. 85% of spouses said that deployment was their most stressful experience in the last 5 years. This was due in part to worry, but almost 25% of deployment related stress stemmed from problems with their children (Dimiceli, Steinhardt, and Smith 2010). Other family stressors related to deployment include uncertainty about danger, separation from family members, and in some cases relocation (Rosen

and Durand 2000; Dimiceli, Steinhardt, and Smith 2010). While discussion about deployments prior to the event between family members is common, reaching out to professionals is not, though most families take at least one preparation step when expecting a deployment (Troxel et al. 2016). This is likely due to the hesitation by military families to engage in social services, however, families who participate in pre-deployment preparations often have better outcomes post deployment (Meadows et al. 2017). Officers are more likely to connect their children to social services than enlisted members. Younger families seem to engage in less prep work which may be because they are unaware of the behaviors that help or the resources available to them (Troxel et al. 2016).

Waiting for a deployment, knowing that the service member will be leaving but has not yet done so, can be extremely difficult for families, especially for those with younger children, with the time right before the deployment starts being the hardest for children (Kelley 1994). This time period is extremely busy for the military member: they have to pack bags, arrange powers of attorney and wills, receive their immunizations, train, and in some cases move their belongings and their families to another location. During this time, family members may want to be close to their service member to get as much time in as possible before they leave, hold them at a distance to make saying goodbye easier, or both in alternating patterns (Henderson 2006). Once a service member has actually departed, the first one to six weeks can be the hardest for family members because they are both experiencing the loss of their loved one, struggling with feelings of relief that the deployment has finally begun (after the long wait leading up to it), and trying to compensate for the loss of the deployed member's roles (Siegel and Davis 2013).

Deployment

For servicemen, depression peaks during deployment, with highest levels just before the

end of their tour of duty. For spouses, depression, PTSD, and anxiety peak during the deployment, with physical trauma experienced by the service member linked to increased anxiety and depression symptoms in spouses (Ramchand et al. 2016). For youth, deployments may lead to them experiencing challenges related to missing their deployed parent and helping their caregiver deal with life without the deployed parent around (Chandra et al. 2010). Higher family cohesiveness was linked to less negative child behavior, but wartime deployment had a significant impact on family cohesiveness (Kelley 1994). Family disruption and parental disengagement can contribute to difficulties, especially if the parent tries to confide in their child, or if the child is forced to take up new responsibilities (Richardson et al. 2011).

During deployments, children of all ages may face emotional difficulties (Chandra et al. 2010; Jaycox et al. 2016), higher anxiety (Chandra et al. 2010; Lester et al. 2010; Shiffer et al. 2017, 2018a), depression (Jaycox et al. 2016; Shiffer et al. 2017, 2018a), and/or feelings of isolation (Richardson et al. 2011). These mental health symptoms increase with cumulative deployments (Wong and Gerras 2010; Park 2011). They can also persist even after the deployed parent has returned home (Lester et al. 2010; Jaycox et al. 2016). Children in National Guard or Reserve families may feel isolated during deployment, because other children in their schools are not necessarily experiencing a similar thing (Richardson et al. 2011). Children may experience different symptoms at different ages. For example, in a study of Army youth, Wong and Gerras found that stress during a deployment is highest in the 11-13 year old age bracket and for those who are 17. This may be caused by the military parent missing major life events. For youth in the 14-16 year old age bracket, their stress may be lower because having only one parent physically around gives them more room to be independent (Wong and Gerras 2010). Several studies have found a connection between the mental health of the at-home parent and children

(Barker and Berry 2009; Chandra et al. 2010; McGuire et al. 2016; Sonethavilay et al. 2018).

Only one study has considered both possible directions of this connection, concluding “Whereas it is logically plausible that the emotional distress or problem behaviors of a child can increase parental distress and that distress may be reciprocal across family relationships, we believe that the directionality of the hypothesized 'predictors' is more reasonable; the duration of parental combat deployments during the child’s lifetime and current reports of parental distress symptoms increase child symptoms” (Lester et al. 2010, 319).

Problematic behavior is another common response to deployment, and encompasses internalizing/externalizing behaviors, clinginess, aggression, risky behaviors, attention difficulties, destructive behaviors, withdrawal, and sleep difficulties (Achenback and Ruffle 2000; Kelley 1994; Richardson et al. 2011; Aranda et al. 2011; McGuire et al. 2016; Henderson 2006). Similarly to mental health symptoms, problematic behaviors may persist after the deployed parent comes home, particularly in younger children (Kelley 1994). Also like mental health symptoms, problematic behaviors experienced with military induced separations present differently depending on age group (Chartrand et al. 2008; Hall 2008; Meadows, Tanielian, and Karney 2016). Those younger than 1 may be apathetic, refuse eating, and be listless. From 1-3 they may have tantrums and be irritable and sad. From 3-6 children may exhibit behaviors appropriate to a younger child. They can be clingy, irritable, distressed, aggressive, and have somatic complaints. From 6-12 children may act out. They might focus on everything that the absent parent is missing, and they may exhibit symptoms of depression. From 13-18 teens can be aggressive, rebellious and engage in attention getting behaviors. They may be irritable and show a lack of interest in school (Hall 2008). Teens may have fewer problems than younger children during deployment, but more after their parent returns home (Meadows, Tanielian, and

Karney 2016). This may be from a similar effect to that hypothesized by Wong and Gerras (2010), where teens may have more room to be independent with only one parent at home.

There is also a significant gender difference, though some behaviors vary from study to study. Girls showed heightened internalizing behaviors in one study (Richardson et al. 2011) but heightened externalizing behaviors in another (Lester et al. 2010). Similarly to symptoms associated with mental health, problematic behavior can worsen with cumulative months of deployment (Richardson et al. 2010; Barker and Berry 2009; McGuire et al. 2016)

During a deployment, military youth also may experience academic difficulties (Chandra et al. 2010; Richardson et al. 2011). Children may be gone for extended periods of time when their deployed parent returns so that the family can spend time together, causing the child to miss key instruction time. Additionally, during the deployment military children may have trouble completing their homework because the at-home parent doesn't have time to help them missing a (Richardson et al. 2011). Parental involvement in a child's schooling can positively impact their achievement (Reynolds 1992; Reynolds et al. 1992; Gronlick et al. 1997). However, major life events such as family problems, food insecurity, death of a family member, living in a single parent home, moving to a new residence, drug/alcohol abuse by a family member, whether the student was held back a year, and witnessing neighborhood violence can contribute to a lack of parental involvement (Reynolds et al. 1992). It should be noted here that four of these items - living in a single parent home, moving to a new residence, food insecurity, and the death of a family member - could all impact military children when they experience a deployment, as well as outside of deployments. All of these situations are incredibly stressful for the non-deployed parent, and high levels of stress often result in lower parental participation with their children (Gronlick et al. 1997). A parent may have a strong desire to work with their children and make

sure they succeed, but be unable to: "His mother was doing her best, but her best was limited - she was new to military life and overwhelmed by all her children, the army, her husband being gone, the fear and grief of a war. She wanted her son to succeed. She just didn't have the resources to help him" (Henderson 2006, 182). Similarly one DoD schoolteacher explained this saying, "sometimes [non-deployed parents] just don't have time to sit down with them... I mean, you have to get the meal done, cut the grass, four kids" (Henderson 2006, 178). When families are already taxed, parents who perceive their child(ren) as difficult may withdraw from working with them.

Students who live on or near a military installation often get more support than other students during deployments. In particular, National Guard and Reserve youth are at a disadvantage because they may live far from a base and teachers may not think to ask about activations or deployments, especially because these parents also hold civilian jobs (Henderson 2006; Richardson et al. 2011).

Deployment Morale and Readiness

Once a military member is deployed, both their individual and their unit readiness becomes critical. Military readiness is a "combination of a soldier's willingness and ability to do his job and cope in peacetime and during combat, and the army's ability to retain trained service members during peacetime" (Schneider and Martin 1994, 20). Essentially, readiness is the ability of the military to perform as expected at any point in time, regardless of notice. It takes into account both physical readiness (the ability for service members to perform the physical tasks required of them in an operation) and psychological readiness. Intrinsic to psychological readiness is morale. Although incredibly hard to define in one way, every military member or

spouse is able to determine whether they have high or low morale, and whether things improved their morale or detracted from it. The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "morale" as:

1: moral principles, teachings, or conduct

2a: the mental and emotional condition (as of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty) of an individual or group with regard to the function or tasks at hand; b: a sense of common purpose with respect to a group

3: the level of individual psychological well-being based on such factors as a sense of purpose and confidence in the future" (accessed December 19, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morale>).

Using this as a framework, morale has three major components: psychological well-being, group solidarity, and sense of purpose. Improving any of the three components can improve morale, but total morale of the individual, the unit, or the military body as a whole depends upon all three being strong. Much of this thesis will address aspects of military life that impact psychological well-being; however, I address both group solidarity and a sense of purpose here.

Inherent to group solidarity is the establishment of a strong psychological sense of community within a group. Sense of community is defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis 1986, 9). Theory exploring sense of community is built on four main concepts: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. *Membership* is "the feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore has the right to belong" (McMillan & Chavis 1986, 9). It is characterized by feelings of belongingness to the group as well as things such as common symbols. Training exercises, boot camp, and rites of passage such as rank pinnings all serve to establish both an investment of time on the part of the member, but also group recognition that a service members work has met requirements for acceptance by the

larger community into the group. Furthermore, a strong network of symbols such as the uniforms, seals, and songs of each branch of the military visually identify members as "military" and sets them apart from larger civilian culture. These also help to visually establish who is part of the "in-group" and who is part of the "out-group". In these cases the out-group could mean a number of things: civilians because they are not military, another branch because each have unique uniforms and seals, or even within a branch symbols can denote one section of that branch from another. For example, Navy Seals are seen as an elite group in the Navy, who have undergone extensive training additional to that received by others.

Influence is "whether or not individuals believe they can affect the community" and the pressures the community puts on the individual (McCarthy et al. 1990, 212). As already established in the previous chapter, the military as an institution exerts an enormous amount of influence on an individual to behave and act in a certain way. *Fulfillment of needs* encompasses both the individual's needs being met by the community and the individual fulfilling the community's needs, as well as feelings of pride in the community (McCarthy et al. 1990). Through training and in missions an individual "is recognized as being personally responsible for his own part in accomplishing that difficult task" (Ulio 1941, 324). Furthermore it is stressed within the military institution that every individual has an impact on the readiness and the success of the unit, because "There must not be weaklings in the fighting units of the command. Every straggler is a liability" (Ulio 1941, 326). Finally, the last concept, *shared emotional connection*, can be founded upon a "shared history of struggles and successes" (McCarthy et al. 1990, 212), which is inherent in any military training exercise or mission.

As can be seen in the above descriptions, training exercises have a powerful impact on the group solidarity/sense of community; they create unit cohesion, create a sense of pride in the

group, and define the in-group (Strachan 2006). It also makes the training actions instinctual (Strachan 2006; Foucault 1975). All of this creates a sense of self confidence in the unit (Strachan 2006). One of the purposes of training is to ensure a "a feeling on the recruit's part that he is now a member of a powerful team" as he is "pouring out his strength unselfishly toward the accomplishment of a common purpose" (Ulio 1941, 323).

A sense of purpose is critical, as it creates a sense of duty or work towards a "great and noble object" (Strachan 2006). Brigadier General James A. Ulio believed that "the great basic factor in the creation of military morale is devotion to a cause" (1941, 325). Beyond the military member, sense of purpose is a key component of military family readiness. Families cope better with the stressors of military life when they are able to derive meaning from their situation (Sonethavilay et al. 2018; Pargament and Sweeney 2011; Kizer and Menestrel 2019).

Furthermore, meaning making is linked to the development of personal growth in an adverse situation (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 2011). The ways that family morale is impacted and improved is important because a key component of soldier health and well-being is the health and well-being of their family (Park 2011). A family's adaptability, employment of the spouse, and positive perception of military culture impact family readiness in a positive way. "Given the demand of the military mission and the readiness requirements, the morale and productivity of both the service members and their families are critical to mission effectiveness. Family readiness is essential to unit readiness" (Hall 2008, 73).

Communication during Deployments

Communication home to families during military induced separations (deployments, training exercises, etc.) is a critical way of maintaining troop morale (Applewhite and Segal 1990; Bell et al. 1999; Greene et al. 2010). Being away from family can contribute to boredom,

and the ability to talk to family back home through phone calls, letters, video calls, and instant messaging is a way to help alleviate that boredom (Applewhite and Segal 1990; Greene et al. 2010). This is particularly important to military service members who are married and/or have children (Drummet, Coleman, and Cable 2003; Greene et al. 2010). Indeed, as early as 1995 many troops were expressing an expectation of being able to use a telephone during their deployments (Ender 1995).

This expectation, however, has some drawbacks. When the reality of communication in the field during a deployment doesn't match spouse or military member expectations, it can cause frustration and negatively impact readiness (Schumm et al. 2004; Greene et al. 2010). Additionally, consistent communication with families back home can have negative impacts on a military member. "In some ways, this constant possibility of communication may pose new challenges because the soldier's world of combat and the stateside partner's world of single parenting are so radically different" (Gottman, Gottman and Atkins 2011, 53). Soldiers don't always communicate their actual situation to their family so as to not worry them. Sometimes this lack of communication is due to the security risk inherent in sharing information across a communication line (Ender 1995; Durham 2010). Regardless of the reason, this deepens the disconnect between the soldier's lived experience and the family's lived experience. This can lead to the spouse feeling like their military member isn't there for them, and the military member feeling like the family's stressors are inadequate or hard to connect with compared to their own stress (Gottman, Gottman and Atkins 2011).

Military member stress may increase when spouses express challenges experienced at home, either financially or with children, that the military member feels like they can't do anything about (Applewhite and Segal 1990; Ender 1995; Bell et al. 1999; Greene et al. 2010;

Cigrang et al. 2014). Some soldiers indicate that hearing about problems at home is a "distraction" (Durham 2010). This directly impacts individual and unit readiness. The appearance that telephone use is not being distributed evenly among military members can also cause frustration and stress, not only within a unit but also between the spouses back home (Ender 1995; Henderson 2006). If a spouse complains about lack of communication to a military member, it can widen the gap between them. In Kristen Henderson's book about the experiences of military spouses, after hearing that the other wives in her unit heard from their military members more often than she heard from her husband, Beth confronted her husband over the phone:

“Why don't you call me?”

“What do you mean?” he said.

She paced back and forth. “Everybody else's husband calls them. Every day, practically. It just makes me wonder if you don't love me anymore.”

“Don't - what?” he said, and then his voice went supernova and Beth was so startled she stopped pacing. “I work all the time! I don't know what you think I'm doing over here, baby, but I work all the time! I barely get to sleep! When can I talk to you? When?” ...Even when he did find a minute to call her, he couldn't just pick up the phone. He had to stand in a long line and then after a few minutes, the phone would go dead. (2010, 150).

This interaction illustrates the stress arguments that occur over the phone can cause, as well as the disconnect between the lived experiences of spouses and the lived experiences of soldiers. If families experience communication challenges during a deployment, those challenges may persist even after the military member returns home (Houston et al. 2013).

Despite these challenges, however, the majority of military members consider that communication home with their families represented a net positive (Applewhite and Segal 1990). Furthermore, only a minority report that challenges with communication negatively impact their

morale or their readiness (Ciagrang et al. 2014). Positive family communication can be linked to more positive outcomes post-deployment (Houston et al. 2013). Furthermore, more delayed forms of communication, such as e-mail and letters, provide military members with something tangible that they can return to, as well as more careful, thought out communication, and may help to decrease PTSD symptoms (Carter et al. 2011). “What spouses apparently need [is]... at least one ordinary means [of communication] that is reliable and available from the start of the deployment” (Bell et al. 1999, 516). Early and reliable communication relieves spouse stress, which improves their attitudes about the military and thus has a positive impact on soldier retention, while at the same time improving both spouse and military member morale (Bell et al. 1999).

Reintegration

Families often function well while their soldier is gone, and that can make their coming home a disruption (Wertsch 1991). As one spouse put it, "When John was home, I never did the bills, never went out alone. So I did all that stuff [while he was deployed]. I had to be more strong, for him and for me, and the baby. And now it's kind of hard, too, because you've done everything by yourself and here comes someone just stepping in" (Henderson 2006). There are four main challenges that military families face over the course of reintegration. The first deals with redefining roles of each family member, the division of labor, and expectations of each person. This requires a lot of communication and an understanding that the military member may feel that they are no longer needed in the family (Wertsch 1991; Henderson 2006; Bowling and Sherman 2008). The knowledge that the military member may deploy again can make this particularly difficult, especially if the family doesn't want to have to keep re-drawing those routines and roles (Bowling and Sherman 2008). These constant absences can result in the

family shutting the military member out, either emotionally or practically (Hall 2008). Reintegration can be difficult for teens, especially if they are worried about having to experience another deployment (Chandra et al. 2010). Teens have been found to have lower quality relationships with their military parent upon the parent's return from a long deployment (Meadows, Tanielian, and Karney 2016; Jaycox et al. 2016). For teens, physical trauma experienced by their service member can be linked to worse reintegration. Psychological trauma, however, is linked to better reintegration (Jaycox et al. 2016).

Managing strong emotions can also be difficult, especially for the military member. It is important to note that PTSD symptoms can transfer to the family as well. With that, the next hurdle is allowing everyone to *feel* again and creating intimacy in relationships. Again, this can be particularly hard for soldiers coming out of the combat area, because of the emotional blocks they put up to function in a high stress environment. Because spouses, military members, and children all experience a deployment differently, the final important aspect of reintegration is creating a shared meaning of the deployment experience (Bowling and Sherman 2008).

Re-Enlistment and Retention

Military members whose terms are ending have the option to re-enlist. This process of continuing beyond their first term is called retention. Families have one of the greatest impacts on a military member's retention. Concerns about the impact of military service on their family and lack of time with their family were the top reasons why current military members would leave, the top reasons why veterans did and 22% of the people surveyed in the 2017 Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey indicated plans to leave because of family issues. This trend continued into 2018, as time away from family emerged as the top concern for military members and their spouses (Sonethavilay et al. 2018). For junior enlisted spouses in the Army, marital

problems and perceived support for families during deployment have predicted retention in the past. The Army/family interface was a predictor for intention to re-enlist. For NCO's, spousal wishes were the most significant factor for retention, as well as marital problems (Rosen and Durand 1995). Family cohesion and stress can also impact re-enlistment for some soldiers, with families who chose to not re-enlist exhibiting on average double or more behavior and attachment problems than those who did re-enlist in one study (Barker and Berry 2009). For women in the Navy, demands on family, motherhood, as well as the possibility of an upcoming deployment can be major reasons for leaving the military (Kelley et al. 2001).

However, the academic difficulties experienced by children of military parents is often due more to military lifestyle than it is to deployments. Because military families PCS every 2-4 years, they move frequently. Changing schools, often in the middle of the school year, "can be difficult both socially and academically for military children" (United Service Organizations 2018,19). In a panel of 4 military youth at the Military Child Education Coalition National Training Seminar in 2019, all of them reported that their biggest concerns with PCSing were their education and their ability to get involved in extracurriculars (such as sports), and the need to re-prove themselves to coaches and teachers at their new school. Because graduation requirements can vary widely from state to state, military students may be held back from graduating because they didn't fulfill the necessary requirements for the school they end up graduating at. School counselors can be the best resource for military youth, but one of the biggest barriers for educators is that they don't know who in the school is from a military family and who is not, or who has a deployed parent (Richardson et al. 2011). For these reasons, military child education has emerged as a top concern for military families over the past few years, and military families home school their children at four times the national rate

(Sonethavilay et al. 2018). In regards to military member retention, education for their children is a high priority for airmen. Education impacts, more than deployments, make airmen question their military service (Goldfein 2019). Regardless of branch, impacts on children feature as a key concern for military families, both the ones who decide to re-enlist, and those who choose to leave the service.

Military Family Resiliency and Growth

Positive Psychology

The previous section highlights many of the challenges that military families face, which can serve to paint a bleak picture of military family life. However, despite their challenges, many military families not only survive, but thrive during the course of their service. Key to understanding how these military families succeed *despite* the challenges of military life is positive psychology theory, which is "the science of understanding and promoting behavioral, cognitive, and emotional health" (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 2011, 5). Positive psychology theorists seek to understand what characteristics help individuals cope with stressful life events, and how these characteristics can be taught or learned to promote widespread positive outcomes. "At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic" (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

The U.S. Army has begun extensive research into positive psychology theory, and how it can be utilized to better promote positive outcomes in soldiers after their deployments. This is

opposite the historical approach to negative outcomes in the military, which was to wait for symptoms to surface and then treat them using the psychopathological framework. Instead, positive psychology is preventative (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 2011). Positive psychology is positioned to work well within the military's existing social framework:

Once in the army, soldiers must complete challenging training courses, maintain high physical fitness standards, and adhere to a strict code of conduct compared to their civilian counterparts. The army doctrine explicitly recognizes the importance of positive traits among soldiers. For instance, the Army's seven core values (loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage) correspond to character strengths postulated by Peterson and Seligman. (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 2011, 5)

Although specifically an Army program, positive psychology can be applied to all of the military branches, since the core values attributed to the Army in this quote can also ascribed to the other branches as well.

The Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program (CSF) aims to integrate four aspects of positive psychology: emotional fitness, social fitness, family fitness, and spiritual fitness (Peterson, Park, and Castro 2011). Because “experiences of positive emotions appear to promote effective coping”, the emotional fitness component of the CSF is designed to train soldiers in the ability to recognize and balance both positive and negative emotions (Algoe and Fredrickson 2011, 36). Being able to find some elements of good, even in adverse conditions, is an important element of emotional resilience, and through that, also a strong morale booster. It requires the ability to reframe a situation to highlight and focus on positives rather than negatives. For example, rather than focusing on the long and irregular work hours, heat, stress, and lack of access to amenities during her time in Iraq, Blaise reflected that her time in Iraq brought her and her husband closer together as a married couple. Although they were not able to live together due to their duties with the Army, they were part of the same unit and lived 10 minutes away from each other on opposite sides of the camp. Compared to the difficulties they had faced

trying to get assignments in the same location in the U.S., their time in Iraq offered them more of a traditional marriage than they had had before deployment (Blaise 2005).

The social fitness component of the program encompasses "the capacity to foster, engage in, and sustain positive relationships and to endure and recover from life stressors and social isolation" (Cacioppo, Reis, and Zatura 2011, 44). This also includes turning adversity into growth, and how one works with others to do so. It "emphasizes the role of connections with other individuals, groups, and large collectives as a means of fostering adaptation through new learning and growth" (Cacioppo, Reis, and Zatura 2011, 44). It is important to note in the scope of the CSF, social fitness refers specifically to *military* social networks (Peterson, Park, and Castro 2011), though the same principles would apply to families as well. Social resilience can be thought of as synonymous with a psychological sense of community. This is a multilevel concept because it entails both group level and individual level traits.

Spiritual fitness is the essential core of the individual, which is tied to their purpose and meaning. People who have a well centered spirit are more able to find meaning in trauma, find motivation to persevere, grow from adversity and maintain balanced mental health. Spiritual fitness entails self-awareness, sense of agency, self-regulation, self-motivation, and social awareness (Pargament and Sweeney 2011).

Military Family Resilience

Military families are resilient. Many of the challenges/demands of military life are also opportunities for growth. Whether a family sees these situations as opportunities or challenges though depends on the support the family has, their experience with the military, their background, and individual level characteristics (Kizer & Menestrel 2019; Williams 2019).

Similar to the social fitness component in the CSF, throughout the literature family cohesion has

emerged as one of the strongest predictors for military family resilience (Sonethavilay et al. 2018; McCubbin and McCubbin 1988; McCubbin and Lavee 1986; Bowen, Orthner and Zimmerman 1983; Park 2011; Wong and Gerras 2010). Cohesive families generally tend to focus on open communication between all members of the family (Sonethavilay et al. 2018, McCubbin and McCubbin 1988; Saltzman et al. 2011). Having strong communication between members of a family can help families create a shared meaning of military challenges (Bowling and Sherman 2008). Like the importance of finding meaning in challenges for military member morale (Strachman 2006; Ulio 1941; Pargament and Sweeney 2011), families also have better outcomes when they are able to derive meaning from their situations (McCubbin and McCubbin 1988; Saltzman et al. 2011). McCubbin and McCubbin also found that families do better if they are able to "create a climate of predictability and continuity" such as maintaining family traditions, acknowledging celebrations, and maintaining routines (1988, 253; Hall 2008).

For children, being close to their families was highly protective, not just during deployments but also during other stressful times, such as PCPs. Military youth have commented that because they moved so often, their family became their main support systems and that their siblings became their closest friends because their family was the one thing that stayed the same regardless of where they were or what they were doing (Military Child Education Coalition 2019). Siblings have been found to play a particularly important role in the positive outcomes of youth, particularly during deployments, when communication between siblings may increase (Houston et al. 2013; Park 2011; Military Child Education Coalition 2019). Additionally, socializing with other military youth, regardless of whether or not a child has siblings, has also been found to be protective (Houston et al. 2013; Jaycox et al. 2016).

Like the importance of positive thoughts within the emotional fitness component of the

CSF, maintaining a positive attitude throughout the challenges of military life is also protective for youth (Hall 2008; Park 2011; Military Child Education Coalition 2019). Looking for the positive aspects of each experience or each new PCS location can improve the overall attitude of children during military induced stressors (Military Child Education Coalition 2019). Getting and staying involved in extracurricular activities such as sports, drama, band, and scouts can help military youth maintain positive outcomes as well (Wong and Gerras 2010). Wong and Gerras pose that this may be because activities with high participation can serve as a distraction for youth, however, this may be more related to the high levels of psychological sense of community associated with extracurricular activities (Hawvermale 2017). Maintaining a strong sense of community can serve as a buffer between stress and negative mental and behavioral outcomes (Vieno et al. 2005; Henry and Slater 2007; Pretty et al. 1994; Chipuer et al. 2002). Military youth also cope better when they have an adult mentor figure in their lives, which can also be found through these extracurricular activities (Wong and Gerras 2010).

Military youth are instilled with a variety of attributes as well through their interaction with the Foucauldian nature of the military institution: respect for authority, tolerance, resourcefulness, adaptability, responsibility, and they tend to engage in fewer risky behaviors than their civilian counterparts. They also often exhibit the military values of service, sacrifice, honor, teamwork, loyalty, sense of purpose, sense of community, and pride, all which can serve as resilience factors (Park 2011). Although families are resilient and proud of it, military spouses are cautious about just how much they can take before breaking (Sonethavilay et al. 2018).

With this it is important to note that, "resilience is not simply a "mantle" of fixed attributes, but rather a dynamic process that fluctuates across development in accordance with

new challenges, strengths, vulnerabilities, opportunities, and emerging competencies” (Saltzman et al. 2011, 215).

Positive Outcomes

When families exhibit characteristics leading to strong resilience, they can experience positive outcomes and growth as a result of their service with the military. Families identified travel, benefits, and supportive military community as the positive aspects of being in the military (Sonethavilay et al. 2018; Southwell and Wadsworth 2016). Geographic isolation from family and friends force families to foster strong bonds within their nuclear family (Sonethavilay et al. 2018). Geographic isolation from spouses during periods of military induced separation can also serve to help non-military spouses learn to be more independent (Henderson 2006). Male spouses have reported that having their wife gone for deployments helped them to build stronger relationships with their children (Southwell and Wadsworth 2016). Additionally, many spouses have a strong sense of pride, both in their service member's service and in their own (Southwell and Wadsworth 2016; United Service Organizations 2018).

Many children see the opportunity to travel the world and experience a diversity of culture and views as a positive aspect to military service (Wertsch 1981; Military Child Education Coalition 2019). This leads many military youth to value diversity because they've lived in diversity - both the diversity of the military and the diversity of the cultures their parents have been stationed at. One military child spoke of this understanding of cultural diversity saying, "the life experience alone is astounding. All of the exposure to different cultures, yes even in the USA. Believe me, people in New Jersey are not like the people in Arkansas. They may speak the same language and look the same, kinda sorta...but culturally, I can definitely say

they are of the human race. No offense to anyone from Arkansas or New Jersey!" (Bergeron 2009, 5).

Due to their time growing up within the military framework, children tend to internalize the duty first mentality by taking duty and responsibility very seriously (Hall 2008; Wertsch 1981; Park 2011; Military Child Education Coalition 2019). They are incredibly loyal and self-sacrificing, and tend to be flexible due to their constantly changing lives growing up (Hall 2008; Wertsch 1981; Park 2011). They are willing to take on new challenges, for better or for worse, and they value productivity and efficiency in their work (Hall 2008). Some children are able to bring the values and skills they learned in the military into their places of work later in life (Hardy 2009). Many see their children's personal growth as a positive outcome of deployment. (Sonethavilay et al. 2018). Thus despite the challenges of military life, most military children and families can find benefits in their service and grow as a result of it.

CHAPTER 4
PROJECT DESIGN

This project utilized a mixed methodological design, employing participant observation, semi-structured qualitative interviews, and surveys. Prior to data collection, permission for this study was obtained through the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board. Data were collected from June 2019 through October 2019 (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

Research Timeline

	Recruitment	Participant Observation	Interviews	Surveys	Data Analysis
May					
June					
July					
Aug					
Sept					
Oct					
Nov					
Dec					

Participant Observation

Participant observation was conducted throughout the research process at three separate Yellow Ribbon events that UTR attended. The Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program is designed to help connect Reserve and National Guard families with resources both before and after being activated for deployments. These one to three day information conferences provide military members and their families with information about activation, health insurance, what to expect during the deployment cycle, and invite "community partners" to set up tables to share information about resources with participants. These community partners often include the American Red Cross, which provides emergency information and contact services to immediate

family members of military personnel; United Services Automobile Association (USAA), the bank and main home and auto insurance agency for the military; Sesame Street, which provides materials to help children understand deployment experiences; the United Service Organization (USO), which provides resources to military members while they are overseas and before they leave; Military & Family Life Counseling (MFLC), which provides non-medical counseling to families and often work in conjunction with DoD schools on military installations; and many other organizations that also serve military families. At all three events, UTR had a community partner booth and gave out information regarding their services, provided free books to the families in attendance, and had a recording room set up where military members could record themselves reading a book.

The first two Yellow Ribbon events were held in Utah. Both were for returning Army National Guard members, and both lasted from 8:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. The first was held in Salt Lake City, and the second was held approximately an hour south in Provo. The third Yellow Ribbon event was held in Dallas, Texas for deploying Army Reservists from across the country (I had individuals talk to me from both Florida and California). The event lasted three days, with the first day being a registration day from 12:00-6:00 p.m., and the second two days being information days lasting from 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. the second day and 8:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. the third day. This event served approximately 450 individuals, including both spouses and their immediate family members (not including children).

At all three events I acted in the capacity of a volunteer, manning the UTR booth, giving out information about the program to participants, and interacting with the service members and their families. For the first two events, I worked in conjunction with a UTR staff member, and for the third event, I worked alone for two days, and one with a fellow cohort mate. The notes

from these three events were coded and analyzed using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program. This participant observation provided a window into the interactions service members have with their families and the things they have to negotiate as they prepare to leave for a deployment or after they come home. It also provided a first-hand account of how individuals react to and interact with UTR when they learn about the program and when they make recordings. This was crucial to coming to a greater understanding of how families interact with UTR as a program.

Interviews

Purpose

The purpose of the interviews was to understand how military families used and interacted with their videos, and the impact those recordings had on the military member, the caregiver, and the children in regards to stress, mental health, morale, and support. Beyond that, the interviews were geared to understand how military members approached making their recordings: how did they hear about UTR? What was their recording experience like? How did they choose their books and how did the experience of reading for their children make them feel? For caregivers these interviews provided an in depth look at how they used the videos in their day to day lives and the impacts that they saw those videos having on their children. These interviews provided the rich and detailed "stories" of this project and informed the creation of the survey form later on.

Participants

I interviewed 19 individuals about their experiences with UTR. Two of these participants were married to each other. Ten of the participants were service members, and nine were caregivers. All of the caregivers were military spouses, and all were female. All of the military

members were male and made their recordings for their own children/spouses. Ten participants were affiliated with the Army (six caregivers, four service members), six were affiliated with the Navy (three caregivers, three service members), two were Air Force service members, and one was a Marine. The sample contained 14 active duty families, three National Guard families, and two Reserve families. All National Guard and Reserve families were Army. Eight participants lived in families where the military member was enlisted, one lived in a family where her husband was a warrant officer, and eight participants lived in families where the military member was an officer. One participant was a military chaplain, and one service member husband made recordings when he was enlisted and after he became an officer.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through e-mails sent through the UTR list serve and through fliers distributed at UTR recording events, Yellow Ribbon events, their permanent recording stations, and at other events they attended, such as FRG meetings. The e-mails contained a link to an online informed consent form. After agreeing to participate in an interview and reviewing the informed consent form, participants were asked to provide their contact information so that I would be able to schedule an interview. Participants who requested to participate via the contact information on the flier were also e-mailed a link to the informed consent form.

The interviews were conducted virtually via Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, or phone call depending on participant preference. The interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes, with the exception of one that lasted 70 minutes, and all but one of the interviews were recorded. This resulted in 10 hours of interview material. Participants received a \$15.00 Barnes & Noble gift card to compensate them for their time. This gift card was e-mailed to them at the conclusion of their interview. Each of the recordings was transcribed by hand using ExpressScribe, and sent

back to the participant to review and make any additions, changes, or removals they deemed necessary.

The interviews were then deductively and inductively coded thematically using MAXQDA. Deductive codes such as "morale," "reunion/re-integration," "retention," and "love of reading" were determined from the interview script and the research questions more generally. Inductive codes such as "connection," "impacts," "spousal support," "mission first," and "newness" emerged from interviewees own words as they described their use of the program. Codes with high prevalence and codes with high instances of co-occurrence were grouped into themes for the data analysis section of this paper.

Measures

Both military members and caregivers were asked questions relating to their use of and experiences with UTR: the impacts that participation in the program had on their children in general and more specifically their children's behavior and love of reading; their own morale; how the use of or making of the recordings made them feel; how they would describe UTR to another military spouse or family; their reactions to or feedback on the UTR App; and any recommendations they had for UTR. Caregivers were specifically asked about how they used their recording on an average day and the reactions their children had to those videos. Military members specifically were asked about their process for choosing books and their experiences recording. Service members were also asked about the relationship UTR had with their continued military service. Additionally, service members were asked if they had gotten to see photos or videos of their children watching the recording, and if so what their reaction was. In many cases there was bleed over between service member specific and caregiver specific questions (e.g.

caregivers would explain how and why their husbands chose the books that they did, and military members would describe how their wives used the videos on a day to day basis).

In all interviews, participants were asked background questions including how often they were able to communicate with their families during their deployments, how many children they had, as well as ages and genders, how many times they had been deployed, how many recordings they had made with UTR, and their service branch, activation status, and rank (i.e. enlisted/NCO/officer). For the full interview scripts please see Appendices A and B.

Survey

Purpose

The survey was geared towards understanding what the impacts of participating in UTR were on children, caregivers and military members. The questions were informed by the interviews, and were designed to provide a more generalizable set of data for UTR to use in their informational materials and grant applications moving forward.

Participants

Fifty-eight total surveys were collected between the online and offline versions. Thirty-five (60%) of these were caregiver surveys and 23 (30%) were military member surveys. Of the military members who participated 56.5 % were male (n = 13) and 43.5% were female (n = 10). Of the caregivers, only two were male (5.7%). All of the caregivers who participated in the survey were married to or partners of their military member. However, the military members who participated in the survey had sent recordings to spouse/partners, parents, siblings, and aunts/uncles. Fifteen of these military members served in the Army, five served in the Marines, and three served in the Navy. Of the caregivers, nine lived in Army families, three in Air Force families, six in Marine families, and 17 in Navy families. The majority of the military members

(95.7%) and caregivers (91.4%) were active duty. One service member and one caregiver were part of National Guard families, and two caregivers were part of Reserve families. The demographics of the entire sample, both military and caregiver, are provided in Table 4.2.

The number of deployments experienced by the military members of the families who participated in this phase of the research ranged from 1 to 12, with an average of 4.17 ($SD = 2.63$). Families were asked to report how many recordings they had sent home/received from their military member, with a scale ranging from 1-10+. The average number of recordings was 4.63 ($SD = 2.8$).

Table 4.2

Demographic Descriptive Variables

	Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	15	25.8
	Female	43	74.1
Relationship	Spouse	49	84.4
	Parent	5	8.6
	Sibling	1	1.7
	Aunt/Uncle	2	3.4
Activity Status	Active Duty	54	93.1
	Reserve	2	3.4
	National Guard	2	3.4
Service Branch	Army	24	41.3
	Air Force	3	5.1
	Navy	20	34.4
	Marines	11	18.9
Rank	Enlisted	10	17.2
	NCO	3	5.1
	Warrant Officer	1	1.7
	Officer	44	75.8

Procedures

Participants included both military members and caregivers. Participants were recruited via the UTR e-mail list serve, and on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Additionally, participants were recruited at UTR recording events (e.g. Yellow Ribbon events, permanent recording stations, etc.) with fliers. The fliers included the contact information for the PI, as well as the URL for a page on the UTR website that described the survey and hosted links for the survey.

The survey was conducted through Qualtrics (online) and through Survey Gizmo (offline). The offline version was used at UTR events that did not have access to internet. Participants had the opportunity to enter their e-mail for a drawing to win a \$25.00 Barnes & Noble gift card. E-mails were collected separately from survey responses to maintain confidentiality. All e-mails were assigned a number and the winner was selected using a random number generator at the conclusion of survey collection. At the conclusion of the surveys, participants were invited to participate in a longer interview about their experiences if they were interested, however no survey respondents indicated an interest. All surveys were analyzed using SPSS. Frequency analyses were run on every question, and relationships were tested using chi-square tests.

Measures

This survey was customized into different versions for caregivers and service members, though both versions asked the same substantive questions (e.g. "what is your service branch?" for military members and "what is your military member's service branch?" for caregivers). Questions covered the same topics as the interviews: military related information (rank, activation status, branch); for whom they made their recordings, the age and genders of those children; how often they watched the videos; the impacts on morale for caregivers and service

members; the impacts on stress for caregivers and service members; the impacts on child outcomes such as behavior, stress, reintegration, depression, and academic achievement; the impacts of the videos on military retention/re-enlistment; whether they would recommend UTR to another military family; and any suggestions they had. A full version of each survey is provided in Appendices C and D.

Child Outcomes

In order to understand how children who receive UTR recordings differ from the larger military population, the surveys replicated a question found on the Blue Star Families Lifestyle Survey (Shiffer et al. 2017, Sonethavilay et al. 2018). This question asked whether children had experienced personal growth or resilience; increased pride or confidence; separation anxiety, worry, or sleep problems; behavior problems; reintegration challenges upon the service member's return; decreased academic performance; or depression, and whether they experienced it "moderately" or "to a greater extent". Because Blue Star Families surveys military families across branches and activation status, and reports this data as percentages, they are representative of the national military population and serve as the comparison group for the present survey. Permission to use this question was obtained from Blue Star Families prior to survey distribution.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DELIVERABLES

The two phases of this research sought to address the impacts of UTR on 1) children's love of reading, 2) children's behavior, 3) service member and caregiver stress and morale, and 4) service member retention and re-enlistment. The findings of this research indicate that UTR facilitates feelings of connection between service members and their families during times of military induced separation. This connection represents an underlying theme throughout the research findings. Families who used UTR attributed lower reintegration difficulties to the program. The recordings were seen as a way to keep the memory of the service member in younger children, and use of the recordings served to keep the service member as part of the family's routine. Although UTR is sometimes seen as a program to help children with military separations, caregivers reported experiencing significant benefits as well, including reduced stress and improved morale. In terms of morale, UTR helped improve the morale of service members, caregivers, children, and the family unit as a whole, and may work to improve morale within a military unit, even for those who did not make recordings themselves. The use of the recordings overcame many of the challenges and constraints associated with other forms of communication, such as time zone differences, connectivity problems, child interest, blackout dates, and accommodating children's requests to see their service member.

Furthermore, UTR contributed to a love of reading in children who were not already avid readers and emphasized a love of reading in children who already had one by making reading something special. Other child outcomes included the moderation of behavior problems as well as stress and anxiety levels. When families talked about UTR, they emphasized the benefits that they experienced, such as increased feelings of connection with their service member, the ease of

recording use over other forms of communication, and feeling like their service member is still an active part of their lives. Families cited family resiliency, strengthened family bonds during separation, and increased family connectedness as their top three benefits of UTR, although keeping the military member as part of the family routine, helping children recognize their service member, family readiness, and an increased desire to read were all mentioned by more than half of the survey respondents.

Service members agreed that UTR did not directly impact their desire to re-enlist or continue their military service, however the program's impacts on family and child well-being may have contributed indirectly to military member retention. These findings are presented in more detail in the following two sections. Additionally, as part of this research I presented these findings in a condensed form to UTR, in the form of a slide deck and a white paper. These deliverables, as well as UTR's reaction to them, are also presented below.

Qualitative Findings

Theme 1: UTR Facilitates Connection between Military Members and Their Families

Overwhelmingly, military members and their families felt that having and using their UTR recordings helped to facilitate a feeling of connection between military members and their families. Of the 19 individuals interviewed, 15 specifically used the word "connection" when describing this interaction in responses to questions about the impacts that using their recording had on their family, though every participant generally talked about UTR helping to maintain a family bond during deployments. The theme of connection pervades through almost every other theme as well, making it one of the most prominent and overarching impacts of the UTR program. Connection, for many participants, meant that they felt like they were still present with their family, even when they were separated by distance. For others this feeling of connection

stemmed from feeling as though they were still part of their family's routine. Yet still for some UTR served as a crucial way for them to "meet" and begin to foster a bond with children that were born while the military member was away.

I saw [UTR] as an opportunity to connect with my daughter in a way that's as close as possible to me being there reading a story to her, something as simple but as powerful as that... But she really loved it too, it was like the book was that connection between you know, between me and her. At that moment we were both doing the same thing at the same time, looking at the same time. And she didn't even know I was using the book that she had in her hands. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

What a great way for him to stay in the lives, you know, even if you're just the big brother and you have a little brother back home, you can still stay connected to that, it's just, I feel like United Through Reading, what they do can go so far [yeah] to connecting people with the ones they love. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer)

I think it would be interesting to know how it is for the child, how they feel, and I'm sure that connection, that physical touch and connection, nothing supplements that, but I'm sure a close second is still being able to have the connection of a shared experience. (Active Duty Air Force, Officer)

These quotes illustrate the ways participants talked about how the video recordings helped them feel physically connected to their families, even when they were separated. For the National Guardsman, the act of doing the same thing, and holding the same book, gave him a connection to his daughter that he would not otherwise have had. The Army spouse in the second quote used "connection" to describe their military member still being a part of their lives, and further pointed out that this connection is not just for parents and children; siblings can also benefit from staying in each other's lives. Similarly to the National Guardsman, in the third quote, the Airman commented on connection stemming from the shared experience of reading a story together. For some, this connection was facilitated through feeling like they were still part of their family's routine:

You know that time when you have with your kids at the end of the day, and it's just you and them and you're usually laying in bed and you're reading to them, those are some of the most personal and close moments you have with your children, and so it, you know,

that's something that we've always done, and it was really special to be able to do that even though I was deployed exactly halfway around the world from where my kids were. United Through Reading brought us back together instantly through reading that book together on the video. (Active Duty Marine, Officer)

When families used the videos as part of their nightly routine, spouses commented that it felt like their military member was still present and still an active participant in the household:

My husband was normally the one who – he worked really late and his job, [but] he would always make it home for bedtime. So that was their ritual that they did was that he did bath time, the books for bedtime and putting my son down, so that was kind of a way for us to keep that tradition going even though he was deployed. I would do bath time and then we would put on the video so that Daddy could still read the book for bedtime. And my son just thought it was so wonderful having him read that story. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Officer)

I think it definitely helped keep the kids closer and kinda give that nightly routine. They love to be read to, so we read books every night. So just kind of being able to keep him as part of that routine of theirs was a really cool thing. Just getting a phone call is one thing, but kinda building him into the routine of “do you want him to read you a book tonight?” Kind of a cool way just to keep the family together and keep him part of that routine. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Enlisted)

They don't get to see your face that often, so not only were they seeing your face but they're seeing you read a book, which is something that we do every night in our family, so for them I think it was probably reassuring and [brings] some type of normalcy to their life while I'm not there. (Active Duty Marine, Officer)

Several of the quotes above exemplify the way, participants incorporated UTR videos into their routine, and their experiences of how this practice contributed to the feeling that their military member was still part of their daily lives. Many research participants ($n = 9$) would watch their videos every day or nearly every day. Most incorporated the videos into their bedtime routine, which made them feel like “daddy” was reading them a story. However, families would also use the videos during the day or when children specifically asked for them:

My wife told me that when she'd play the videos like she would stop crying, she would do that to calm her down, stuff like that. (Active Duty Marine, Enlisted)

We would get up in the morning and they would be like “Let's watch Daddy” and it's like “okay,” I didn't mind! (Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer)

For families who have used UTR for multiple deployments, having a routine already set in place for how they used their videos helped children transition from pre-deployment to deployment:

Shoot, he did a four day tour or four day training in Texas and I mean my kid was just like, she knows the drill. The first night dad's always gone we go out to eat at a restaurant, [and] we usually go take her to something dumb like iHop or McDonalds or whatever. And then the second night we always watch a daddy video. So for four days she was like I want food, then I want a daddy video. [interviewer: "And she's good?"] You know she's good, it's her routine now. (Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Officer)

For this spouse, although they had not experienced a lengthy deployment for some time, her husband was required to attend shorter trainings and ship duty weekends often. Their UTR recordings helped create a routine for their daughter around these separations that made them easier. As a way of engaging military children in the separation experience, another respondent discussed how he will often let his children pick out a book for him to read before he leaves for a military-related trip:

It's something they look forward to. In fact, it gives us something to talk about when I return back we've had a common experience that we all shared during that time that we've been away... I think that those connections are the best way to reduce that stress and that anticipation. (Active Duty Air Force, Officer)

For this family, the stories, picked by the children before their father leaves, helped give them a shared experience so that, when the airman returned, they had something to talk about. In doing so, his children's stress about the separation was reduced.

UTR was also a way of facilitating a connection between the military member and a child they had never met. It is not uncommon for military spouses to give birth while their husbands are deployed. For some families then, UTR served as a mechanism for their newborns to "meet" their fathers. This was the case for three of the families in this study. One of the spouses

discussed how her husband made recordings before their child was born as well as after. He wanted to make sure that they had recordings already in place after their daughter was born:

United Through Reading is how my daughter met my husband... Getting the videos before she was born was nice, because emotional pregnant me wanted to cry all the time, and it was like oh yeah, I can get it out, I hear my husband's voice reading to our unborn baby and it was adorable, and I cried, and I talked to her, and he'd have his voice coming through, so I would listen to that, and we got videos, so we were already prepped and ready to go for when she was born... After she was born we already had the videos set up, so I went from the first book on, so I wanted her to have, I don't know why, that linear video compilation, so first one, the second one, the third and we'd watch a different one like whenever we were sitting on the couch or anything, so I would watch it instead of like kids shows or something to keep me occupied or we'd watch the DVDs back to back to back. So she knew his voice via the telephone but also via the DVDs. (Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Officer)

Here, the recordings not only served to help their newborn daughter learn to recognize her father, they also offered a place for the spouse to express her emotions while connecting to her husband. Similarly, for children who were very young when their military parent deployed, UTR recordings served as a way to remember that parent while they were gone:

You know, we would Skype but [to our four month old] it was just some person, this image on a TV screen or image on a laptop screen. So... it was just this weird, this stranger that both mom and sister loved and was talking to and was happy to see, and so for him, it made him more familiar with his dad. Even though he wasn't around. (Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer)

The remarks by this spouse of an Army Reservist shows the disconnect that other forms of communication may potentially have for younger children. For military members, the fear that younger children would forget them while they were deployed emerged as a prominent concern. Utilizing the video recordings helped mitigate that concern because they were seen as a way to not only maintain a connection, but also feel like they were still playing a role in their child's life.

I think it's a great way to maintain that living relationship with your children. I think that's one of the difficult things about deployments is the parent that's away is - you worry that you're becoming forgotten, that you're missing parts of your children's lives.

And by using the United Through Reading videos... in their eyes you're still sort of a participant in their lives. Even though you the parent are not physically there, it's almost like they think you're there, cus if you're able to read them a bedtime story then you're still part of their life and they remember you as part of their life. I think there's a conscious or subconscious fear when you're deployed that "oh, I'm forgotten," like out of sight out of mind. And so that helps attenuate or mitigate that concern. (Active Duty Army, Officer)

I think it helped keep his dad presence in mind. I know that one of my husband's biggest fears was that our son wouldn't remember him when he came home cus he was so little, and I guess it helped there. The second my son saw him he went running to him, and I think it had a pretty big role in that. Otherwise I don't know if he would have responded like that honestly. There's only so many times you can show them pictures and talk about them. But having that recording and hearing the voice and playing it so often really helped that happen. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Officer)

I feel after the deployment, and I feel that the books did help with that, because it helped me keep that connection established although I was far away for a year, and those were actually big concern. I thought she was not gonna remember me or I was afraid she was not gonna like me after, and definitely that helped, you know, maintain that connection that I had with her, and now it's better than ever. Crazier than ever, but better than ever! (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

As suggested by these interview excerpts, participants talked about the role that UTR played in helping them feel like they were still engaged in their child's life, even when they were away. Each one expresses the concern that they or their military member had about their young children forgetting them while they were away, and the role that UTR had in maintaining that connection between parent and child.

Theme 2: Lowered Reintegration Difficulties Attributed to Use of UTR

Another theme that emerged from this research was about the process of reintegration. Although many participants commented that they worried their child would forget them or not recognize them, the connection that UTR made between families and military members was why many families felt that they had an easier re-integration period after the deployment:

Definitely the recordings made it where it wasn't such a hard transition stepping back into his life or my son's life, because they kind of felt like they still had that connection the whole time I was gone. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

Because I mean if we never got to see him or only through text messages or phone calls and that sort of thing, it would be really hard. I don't know how people before technology were able to do this sort of thing and stay connected and not feel like oh, they're not even part of this family. I wouldn't say that it's still not difficult when he comes back for him to blend back into the culture of our family, but it definitely makes it smoother. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer)

This theme of easier reintegration periods is strongly related to connection. Although the participant in the quote referenced above recognizes that there will always be an element of adapting the routine the family had put in place to account for the service member's absence, maintaining a strong connection with family during a deployment helped make re-integration periods easier. Young children were more likely to recognize their military parent at homecoming, and because nearly every family used the video recordings as part of their bedtime routine, story time represented a place where the military member could seamlessly reintegrate – replacing the video recording with themselves.

The recordings also helped families where a child was born during the deployment. In these cases, the recordings helped make the deployed parent less of a stranger when they returned home.

When I came back he was immediately responsive and talking, you know, so it was just awesome to see the change. And I do attribute a lot of that to United Through Reading because he was able to see me and hear me even though I wasn't there, you know. And I've heard experiences from other friends who have said that they've come back and their kids have been really distant from them for a couple days or longer, and I didn't really have that experience with my son. (Active Duty Army, Officer)

[After my husband came home] you would have thought that they had been together the whole time. And that was I think partly due to the fact that we watched those videos all the time and so he knew [his dad's] voice he knew what [his dad] sounded like and was comfortable that [his dad] could just jump right in and do diapers and feedings and all that. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer)

The first time I got [home], you know, [my son] was 2 or 3 months old, and [my girlfriend] was actually kindof annoyed that the crying smelly creature that kept crying at her was extremely happy to see me when I first strode up. (Active Duty Air Force, Enlisted)

It was kindof funny when I met my newborn for the first time... because I picked him up and he was just smiley and just like giddy and kindof nuzzling into me. [My wife] said I think it was honestly because of the recordings, and because of video chatting that he got to hear my voice. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

These families' experiences highlight two things. The first is that military members and spouses both seemed to expect that their newborns would take time before they were comfortable around the service member. The second is that the recordings provided a way for newborns to become familiar with their father's voice, in such a way that even though they had never been physically touched by their military member, they were comfortable in their presence. However, UTR was not a perfect fix for every family. Some children still had difficulty reintegrating their parent into their lives:

My son just would not go near him, would just stare at him like you are familiar, I recognize your face, but why are you not behind... the TV, like who are you? So it was difficult for like the first year. (Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer)

In this case, the child quickly became comfortable being around his father, but the challenge was integrating his dad back into his life. This spouse said that he would only come to her if he needed something, so while he would sit next to and interact with his dad, he did not see his dad as a caretaker. This challenge with the role of the deployed parent after their return was brought up by an Army National Guardsman in a different way:

My son's first reaction the first night I was home, I had said "hey buddy, let's go to bed." And he looks at me and looks at my wife and says, "Dad says that I have to go to bed" and my wife said, "Yeah, that's dad, go to bed, it's time to go to bed." And I think that was my son's realization that there's another authoritarian figure in the house [chuckles] and I kind of have to listen to him now sort of thing, instead of "hey it's just fun dad that plays on the phone." (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

Here the challenge was reintegrating the military parent into the role of a parent, rather than a

"fun dad" that played with him over Facetime and read him stories at night. In both cases, the children had little trouble quickly recognizing and becoming comfortable with the presence of their military parent in the home, but the role of that parent as a caretaker was challenged. Despite these cases, all families reported having few challenges upon their military member's return. None of the children discussed in this study had substantial problems recognizing their parent - the fear that many military members shared.

Theme 3: UTR is Not Just for Children - The Impacts are Significant for Spouses Too

Although UTR was marketed as a program to help children stay connected to their military parent, spouses overwhelmingly commented that they experienced stress relief and a morale boost when they got to see the UTR recordings. Part of this was being able to see their spouse and reaffirm for themselves that they were doing okay. Many also talked about the impact on them to see their spouse's smile or hear their voice.

It made me feel good, again to have that connection. I think the visual, um, you know just seeing him even though it was in the past, it was emotional to see and just provided good memories and yeah, just a visual for him and for me, for our son and for me too. (Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Officer)

It makes it a lot easier to feel like they're still part of the family and that's a big deal for us. It's easy to feel like a single parent when your service member is active duty and this makes it a lot less intense of a feeling, that you really get to have that connection – I love it. If he would just sit there and read me like books on tape I would be happy. (Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Officer)

Many of the participants also talked about feeling like a single parent during military induced separations. For some, they would use the videos as a way for their children to hang out with dad for a little while, so that they could do other things, as is exemplified in the first two of the following quotes.

They helped me know, hey he's okay. And he's safe, and he is just reading a book. Now they kindof make me feel like I get a little bit of a break, even if they are only about 5 minutes long, it's time where I can sort of sit back and watch the boys just enjoy being

with dad for a second and again it also makes me know hey, he's safe, you know, he's not usually in any place particularly dangerous or anything like that, but traveling that much... that's a good feeling for me too. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer)

You know, she's trying to get dinner going, she's like oh I can put a movie on of dad reading the books and all, it'll calm the situation for a little bit while I'm getting dinner and doing whatever. (Active Duty Navy, Officer)

If my wife was putting them down to bed and needed a little bit of time to you know, heaven forbid do the dishes or take a shower or something like that, she could set them up with this video, um, of dad reading to them as a bedtime story, so that would give her 10 or 15 minutes to catch up on activities of daily living. (Active Duty Army, Officer)

The latter service member's wife supported his statement in a separate interview. The videos became a way for the children to "hang out with daddy" for 40 minutes once they had all four of the videos he eventually sent. She said that this was huge for her mental health because she could have that time to herself while they were with him. She could use that time to shower and have a breath from the children.

In this way, the videos served as a tangible way for military members to stay involved at home while they were away and while providing their spouses with support. Some took this a step further, working in parenting messages into their videos to address problems the non-deployed parent had discussed with them over other means of communication:

I would try to leave some kind of little message cus my wife would mention things like our son today, you know, was playing and he pushed one of his friends during soccer, and so it was kind of like, okay, let's try to parent from overseas. You know, try to get some kind of support for my wife and something that she could play over and over and would instill that in him, you know? (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

My wife would make some suggestions in the books, like hey, maybe find one of these like, the Pout Pout Fish book series or look for some of these other ones like we were talking about going to school or bullies or different things. It was fun. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

The idea of including messages of love or encouragement in addition to the story reading was encouraged by UTR staff. Families, however, also used these messages to "parent from

overseas," as the first participant put it. This served the dual role of supporting the non-deployed parent and maintaining an active parenting role in their children's lives while also supporting non-deployed spouses in parenting.

Theme 4: UTR is a Morale Boost for Everyone

Every single participant in the interviews said that UTR improved their morale during the times they were separated due to military work. Many used terms such as "absolutely" and "100% yes" when answering whether they felt that the program had an impact on their morale. For one Army spouse, she said that UTR was a bigger morale boost than anything else the military offered. She attributed this to the fact that her husband was part of the message. She related that the military could do very little to help the everyday family tensions and stress. Having her husband "home" via their recording was the next best thing to having him actually home. Another Army spouse said about her experience:

Even though he wasn't recording a new story and it was the same story, to see it again and again, like throughout the day or every night was kind of like that reminder that he's here for us, that encouragement like, cus, on it he also said, you know, "can't wait to see you soon," you know, "I'm working hard but I'm coming home," and those words of encouragement I think helped to sustain that love and that unity for the family during that time. (Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer)

Again, the theme of maintaining a connection between family members emerged as a central part of improving morale. In regards to children, several of the families talked about UTR being a way for them to turn what could potentially be a very negative experience into a positive one. Families that used their recordings often could look back on their deployment with fonder memories.

Especially when you can build up your kids "Ah, Daddy!" excitement levels that okay, yeah Daddy is coming home, daddy is going to be back soon... any time you can build up your kid's happiness level so that they're not sad about there just being one of you in the house, that makes it a lot easier for you during that cycle of deployment or detachment or TDY or anything like that. (Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Officer)

Here, improving her child's happiness was intrinsically linked to improving both her daughter's morale and her own.

For one of the families in this study who had used UTR through several deployments, they used UTR as a way to boost their children's morale, even before their military member had left on deployment. UTR gave them something to look forward to:

As soon as we broke the news to the kids, I think it was that day of course they're all very sad because they knew it was going to be a long time, one of their first questions was can he do United Through Reading. (Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Enlisted)

For military service members, knowing that their family's morale was improved by the recordings improved their own morale:

I think the family is integral to my personal morale. And if they're well and they're stable and not demonstrating high signs of stress then my stress is definitely impacted for the better, and I can handle a lot better stressors at work if there are less stressors in the home. (Active Duty Air Force, Officer)

You're away and you're kind of worrying, are the kids missing you? So just knowing that they have that tool to be able to utilize definitely makes you feel better. (Army Reservist, Officer)

Having my wife tell me later on, you know, telling me "hey you know the kids really loved the recording and the book and they read it, now they can read it anytime they miss you, now they can pop it in and watch that," definitely did contribute to their morale and my morale. (Army Reservist, Officer)

In each of these cases these military members acknowledge that their morale was impacted by their perception of how well their family is doing. If they knew that their family was coping better because of the recordings, either through implicit assumption as the active duty Air Force officer expressed, or through the explicit explanation by a spouse of how their video was received by their children, their morale was also improved. Several service members commented on the comfort, happiness, and subsequent morale boost they received from getting to watch their children's reactions to the videos, either through photos or video recording:

Oh it was priceless, I mean it was very cute because like, yeah, she would take a picture of them watching the video and so I'd see them watching me you know on the video. And then we're kind of a spiritual family where faith is important, so as part of my reading the story I'd say like a little prayer and so she took a picture of them with their heads bowed during the prayer sort of thing and it was very sweet. (Active Duty Army, Officer)

It was pretty awesome watching his reaction to me, cus I don't think my oldest was talking yet, but he was trying to say Daddy or DaDa or something like that... Yeah, it was just an amazing sight to see and I wondered at the time as I was doing the recording what his reaction would be, whether he would pay attention, does he miss me kind of thing, and obviously he really did and uh, it was great to see [my son] watching that and kind of having the same reaction back at me, course I didn't know it at the time, but ah, even watching it later just made me feel really awesome, really connected to him. (Active Duty Marine, Officer)

Ah, I cried! It was amazing, um, yeah like a father that far away from a child for so many months at that point, it was just a mix of wanting to cry and wanting to laugh at her reaction all together. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

Oh it made me feel great, it definitely encouraged me to want to read it again and to kind of find different ways or different books. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

Being able to see children's reactions to something that they produced was a way for each of these military members to experience the same connection to their children that their families experienced by watching the book recordings. This process was called "closing the circle" by UTR, and was encouraged of every family. Although feelings ranged from "cute" or "awesome" to the physical reaction of crying at the video, each military member who was able to see video recordings or photos of their children engaging with the videos talked about how it was a positive experience for them, and one that they looked forward to.

Even for military members who did not get to see their children's reaction to their videos, the recordings gave them something to look forward to, as reading the stories gave them a break from their day to day routine.

So throughout the deployment you want – cus you're always busy doing your work the whole, you know when you're deployed you're working 24/7, but when you have those little things that you can do like this, it really lifts your spirits and gives you more energy to keep doing what you're doing while you're gone. (Active Duty Navy, Officer)

I would always look forward to getting new books to be able to read to my kid, If they didn't have new books I'd just go take the ones that, but I wouldn't send them cuz I just felt bad about sending the last book. But especially during the holidays and you're away from home, you have that time to sit there, like I missed my kid's first Thanksgiving, first Christmas, first New Years, first Valentines. Like all the major firsts. She's my first child too, so it's not like, didn't even get to see her born or anything like that. At least it kinda helped me feel like I was able to participate, even though I wasn't there, that I was kinda able to participate in some of those holidays for her. (Active Duty Navy, Enlisted)

I definitely think it was encouraging, it was a lot of fun, it was definitely a stress reliever to be able to go sit in there, kind of, I'd read through the book. When you're deployed there's a lot of emotions that can go on, and so it was kind of, some of these books it's like alright, wipe the tears before I get in there and start reading. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

Oh absolutely! It was exciting for me to do it because I knew that two weeks later I would be able to watch her reaction and every time her reaction was amazing so it definitely had a good impact on me during the deployment. It was something that I looked forward to. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

For these service members, creating a UTR recording offered a break from their everyday life during a deployment. As the active duty Naval officer pointed out when he said, "when you're deployed you're working 24/7," military members are never really "off duty" during a deployment, although they may have down time. This is heightened further if they are deployed within a combat zone. However, creating a recording in one of UTR's private rooms offered not only a break from the military work day, but also a secluded and safe space to express emotion, although they would "wipe the tears" before they started the recording. Service members who were making recordings at the Yellow Ribbon pre-deployment events expressed similar sentiments, and many related to me that they hoped they would not cry (or that they did cry) during the process of recording.

One of the participants in this study was a military chaplain. Although he did not make recordings himself, part of his job as a chaplain was to run the UTR recording station on ship.

He provided several insights on the impacts that the process of recording had on service members:

A lot of people, once they did it, would say that, “I really enjoyed doing that I want to do that again”... In terms of my first hand reaction, it was kind of like here’s the camera, it’s all set up in here, I’m going to shut the door, put this cover over the window, and this is all your space. You do whatever, I mean, I don’t even know if they read the books, right? But they sure enjoyed doing it... I can still picture some of the faces of some of the people who were like “Can’t I come back down to your office and do it again?” (Active Duty Navy, Chaplain)

Here he emphasized the importance that was placed on the private space of the recording room, in this case his office, pointing out that he did not even know if the service members actually read the books. He also pointed out how much military members seemed to enjoy their experience, and their desire to do it again. The enjoyment that military members got from making recordings, and the connection that enjoyment had on morale, came up again later in the interview:

As a chaplain I get to be around the people that are like- I can tell a tender spirit that really is like, you know, having a hard time, and then the idea that you have something to offer that says you know I can’t do anything about those garbage circumstances, but I could let you sit in front of this camera. “Oh would you? Oh could I? I could read this book?” And that’s, whether it’s a hardened gunnery sergeant Marine or whether it’s the like, you know the person that came in for one tour of the military and had no idea what sacrifices it was going to be, it ends up being that they made the connection for sure. (Active Duty Navy, Chaplain)

Interestingly, the positive impact of morale on individual military members who participated in the program was also reported to have an impact on the morale of the larger military unit as a whole. When asked about the relationship between the morale of service members who used the program, and the morale of their unit, one Marine explained the impacts of UTR on his morale and the morale of his own unit during a combat deployment as follows:

Especially for that first deployment which was the most dangerous and the hardest to get through, that was absolutely a huge benefit for my morale, and the morale of my wife and the morale of my son and the guys and girls that I was around: both the people who used

it and the folks who uh, even the folks who didn't use it, yes. Even the folks who didn't use it, it actually impacted their morale too because of the guys with families, it made us all happier so [laughs] I think it was a boost for the entire unit... It probably kind of ebbs and flows in a unit, but when you're deployed into a hazardous area, you know there's a ton of stress and that kind of bubbles out when you have downtime. So when you're on a convoy, you're on a mission, you're on a patrol, you're 100% alert, you're looking around, you're paying attention, you don't have time to feel it emotionally. In the evening, or whenever you get back, it could be the daylight, whenever you get back to your patrol base or wherever you're going to spend the night and you decompress for a minute and dial a little bit down. You never really turn it all the way off, but you get ready to go to bed and you rest, that is when it really hits you, and that's also the time when you bond and you have a chance to talk about stuff, and usually you're talking about family, where you're from, you know, and so for guys with kids I mean that's obviously on your mind right then, and so the stress can kind of bubble over then, and you know, it makes it a lot more difficult to communicate with people because you're – part of it is because you're worried you're going to start crying in front of people you don't want to you know be weak in front of. Another part is the more you talk about it the more you're worried about it, and so I definitely think that helped. The ability to be able to know that my child was seeing me reading to them, not having immediate feedback but knowing that connection was there greatly reduced my stress and sense of being apart and so in the evenings when it's time to decompress and talk about it, it was way easier to talk about my family, way easier to try to get to know people, uh, easier to build relationships there because I didn't have so much on my mind about my family that I was worried about. And I know it wasn't only me who felt that way, there were a couple of the guys that we talked about that afterwards with the chaplain, about how it kind of helped our whole unit, and yeah, I really feel it was, it helped, really helped mission success and really helped the morale of the whole unit. (Active Duty Marine, Officer)

In this, the impacts of UTR are not only family-based. Having the recordings improved the morale of spouses and children because they felt that their military member was an active participant in their lives and could stay involved. When a service member's family experienced less stress and was doing "well" military members were less concerned about them, which in turn improved their own morale. Additionally, making video recordings gave military members something to look forward to, and being able to see their children's reactions improved their morale as well. When a soldier's morale was improved because they were less worried about their family, that in turn impacted their ability to relate to their unit in their downtime, which improved unit morale as a whole.

Another element of military member morale that emerged was the newness of the books. Throughout my participant observation, families seemed both surprised and delighted that they were able to keep the books that they recorded. Service members would try to hand the book they had just read back to me when they were finished making their recording. This was not a reaction unique to the pre-deployment events. One of the participants in this study volunteered for UTR at the USO while he was on deployment. He spent several hours a day reading books for his own children, organizing the reading room, setting out books, telling others about the program, offering advice on book selections, and helping service members make recordings. Through this process, he commented that:

And so we would have to go, sometimes we would get the slip of paper [to put in the book] and they'd [write], "hey I hope you like this book," but they wouldn't put the book in it, they'd put it back on the shelf. So we were like "Oh no," you know, so we'd try to nip that in the bud. So I started emphasizing a lot more to people, make sure you put it in the book, and their reactions were very varied and surprised a lot like, "You mean I get to keep this book, this is a nice book, I thought I'd just put it back on the shelf for someone else to read and record it." And they didn't realize that you got to send [the book] home, so [when] we told them that they were able to send it home, they were ecstatic. They would come in more often, it was kind of a big thing for them. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

Here this participant commented on how other service members not only responded to learning that they were able to keep the physical book they had read, but they also commented on how "nice" the book was. Several other service members, as well as the individuals who I interacted with during my fieldwork at the Yellow Ribbon events, seemed to take special notice that the books were free for them to take and read. Additionally, another participant in the interviews remarked on the "newness" of the UTR books. During his interview he talked about the "brand new books" that UTR sent his ship whenever he talked about using the program. When I asked him if it was significant that the books were new, he said:

With the Navy? Oh yeah. With military a lot of times it's like you get this stuff and it's like, oh this is a used whatever. When sailors get packages in the mail and the stuff is like brand new they're like, "Yeessss, brand new!" cuz sometimes the gear that they wear every day is raggedy. Though they get issued new gear and then they wear it for a long time and it gets old and raggedy, so when you get something new on the ship it's like yeah. And the ship in general they have, you know, ships have been around for a while. Some ships are new but ships in general have like old smells to them. When you open up a new book, new smell, you're like [face mimics joy]. So having something new is like, especially when you're under way for such a long time. It's a big deal. (Active Duty Navy, Officer)

Simply being able to open, smell, and interact with a book that was new while underway brought this military member joy. It could be said, then, that UTR first improved his morale in a way that was wholly unrelated to maintaining a connection with his child while he was away.

Theme 5: Recordings Overcome the Challenges and Constraints associated with Other Forms of Communication

Technology has greatly increased the means by which military families can communicate. The families in this sample used a variety of communication strategies, including Facebook Messenger, Facetime, Skype, WhatsApp, Marco Polo, e-mail, handwritten letters, care packages, and phone calls. Some deployments had extremely limited communication, with military members only being able to connect to their loved ones every few months. This was particularly common in combat zones, and on naval ships and submarines. In the case of the latter, service members often had very limited communication while their vessel was underway, and had to wait until they were in port to make calls or use app-based services. They were often not able to tell their family in advance exactly when they were going to be in port, so there was no guarantee that their family would be free.

However, most families were able to communicate with their military members often through weekly use of phone or app-based services and regular e-mail communication. Despite that, many families discussed the challenges of communicating with these services. Several

parents stated that the time zone differences made it difficult to find times where both the military member and the family were free. Additionally, younger children had a hard time understanding how to interact with a video call, and often did not have the attention span for calls:

[UTR] made me feel like it kept him connected a little bit more. Like I said [my son] didn't really understand Facetime and wasn't too interested in the live part of talking to Dad so much. But he stayed connected in keeping that family tradition [of reading] going and just by hearing his voice. I think that helped a lot. Especially at that young age where they didn't really understand why they're gone. I think that helps. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Officer)

Additionally, spouses said that the video chat services sometimes produced a blurry or grainy image, something they did not experience with the higher quality UTR recordings:

I was just really excited because I could see him clearly on the screen instead of you know that grainy fuzziness you get from a video chat. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer)

It's an amazing opportunity to be able to connect with mom, dad, whoever, without having, like I said, the phone etiquette and the choppy video and all that sort of thing. It's a good way for kids to just sit down, to be able to connect with dad without any distractions. Because it's also short. It's a story book, you know, or part of a chapter book. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer)

Ultimately, UTR also overcame the difficulties with both time zones and blackout dates, because families could use their recordings whenever their child asked for them, or at times that were convenient for the families.

Theme 6: UTR Contributes to and Emphasizes a Love of Reading in Children

Every participant in this study agreed that UTR had an impact on their children's love of literature. Although some families talked about their children having a strong love of books before their use of the program, these families also believed that their use of UTR strengthened that love for their children.

He definitely loves reading more. I think that will be a lifelong thing. I would say that that would definitely be something that he's developed: A love of reading, or at least a respect for books kind of thing. He can go to a book or he'll pick out his favorite books and want to read them or share them or enjoys them at least a lot more. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

[UTR] probably just continued to nurture their love of reading. They really love to be read to, both of them do, so having that as a way that they got to see [their father] while he was gone you know, probably helped nurture them a little bit, continue to make that a special time for them...my kids are lucky enough that they already love books and it really solidified that, so you know for kids who – a lot of kids don't have as much exposure, so I just think it's a great program for literacy. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Enlisted)

Besides the, you know, the love for books, I would say it helped [my daughter] read better. She's in that age where she's learning how to read and it definitely helps her do better in school. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

In the first quote above, the National Guardsman noted that his son enjoyed reading more after using UTR through his father's first deployment. In the second quote, the Army spouse noted that her children already loved reading - something that was common among participants in this study - but that UTR helped to solidify that love of reading and make that shared time with their father special. In the final quote, the National Guardsman noted that by facilitating a love of reading in his daughter, UTR also helped her perform better in school. Another family experienced something similar. Like the family in the second quote, their children already had a strong love of reading, and the spouse that I talked to relayed that this was why they felt that UTR would be such a good fit for their family. However, she also noted the special impact that UTR had on her daughter's education:

We just recently found out last year I think that [our youngest is] dyslexic. So here she is, she loves to read... Most kids who are dyslexic at this age hate reading, they go in kicking and screaming, she comes in so confident, just ready to learn. And even though she struggles... just her trying, her going in and not losing that positivity, I think a lot of it has to do because we have made reading such an integral part of our family and used it in such a positive way that even though she has the struggle, she still enjoys it and she still tries. (Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Enlisted)

Like other families who noted that UTR helped transform the negative experiences of separation from their military member into something positive, this family also experienced how the positive experience of using UTR recordings impacted the outlook their daughter had on reading in school, something that was made challenging and sometimes frustrating by her dyslexia.

In addition to improving both academics and love of reading, UTR also contributed to both an increased library for families, as well as exposure to authors they either had not heard of before or did not think they would have heard of before:

Moe Willems has probably been the driving factor in both of my boys gaining the confidence to read on their own. [Interviewer: oh really?] Yes, because his books are simple enough that they can read all of the words pretty much independently, but funny and engaging and so yeah, without [UTR] I'm sure I would have heard of Moe Willems somewhere down the line, but to have you know, almost the entire collection in a mixture of hardback and paperback copies - I don't know if that would have happened... just all the different stories that [my husband] was able to have access to, some of them are ones that I would have never thought to read or anything like that. (Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer)

Because it was not uncommon for families to be introduced to authors or stories through UTR, military members expressed a wide variety of reasons for why they picked the books they did. For some, it was that their children already had a fondness for a particular book. Others picked books that they felt their children would enjoy topically. In some instances, spouses would send book suggestions to military members, asking for books that conveyed a specific message (e.g. a book that discussed bullying). In the interviews, *Goodnight Moon* was mentioned by most participants as a book they read through the UTR program. Following that, Dr. Seuss books seemed to emerge as the next most popular books. At the Yellow Ribbon events, many families asked if we had any books relating to deployments or being away from family. At the pre-deployment yellow ribbon event I attended in Dallas, we had two copies of

The Faraway Fox. This book tells about a fox that is away from his family, but still thinks about them as he travels. Although there were several books that we only had one or two copies of, this was the one that we ran out of first, within the first five people who came to the table. Books that could be used to help give meaning to military induced separations, such as Dr. Seuss's *Oh, The Places You'll Go*, were mentioned often, indicating that military families value the role that books play in ascribing meaning to deployments.

For many families, the books they read with UTR held a special place in their family libraries. Participants commented on how their children still requested that their military parent read the book they received through UTR, sometimes years after their parent returned home.

[My kids] know right where it is, it's in a special place in our house, on a special bookshelf, so whenever we're looking for books to read or we're in that room for whatever reason they'll [go] "oh dad there it is!" and go right back to that... We actually still have that book, it was a pretty powerful moment, so we have that book and I really, that was a really special time for us. (Active Duty Marine, Officer)

They would call them Daddy's stories... the ones they want to hear the most at night is one of daddy's books. (Spouse of Army National Guard, Enlisted)

The use of terms such as "Daddy's stories" or "Daddy's books" was a common theme through the interviews. Children would use these terms to reference both their physical book and their recording, and the use of these terms continued after their military parent returned home.

Theme 7: Spread of Knowledge

As part of the interviews, I asked participants how they would describe UTR to another military member or military family if they were to do so. Although the question was framed as a hypothetical scenario, people overwhelmingly corrected me, saying that they do in fact tell other people about the program. When doing so, the majority of individuals did not talk about the mechanics of the program, such as choosing books or the physical making of recordings.

Participants tended to describe the program in terms of the impacts that it had on their families.

For one enlisted Army reservist, this type of beneficiary driven knowledge spread was the reason why he chose to participate in the program himself:

When I saw the looks on people's faces as they were telling me, "I recorded this book and my children and now I'm back from my first deployment and now we all sit there and they'll watch me reading the books to my child with me sitting next to them in real time," and I can see the looks on their face, so just seeing that - this person's face light up and just be the change in their body posture and how they're getting really happy - I was like oh, you know what, maybe this is something I should look into. (Army Reservist, Enlisted)

He went on to explain why this type of knowledge spread is so important within the military context:

If you're talking to another military family and you can kind of understand what people are going through. You can understand what having your father away is like. So if you're with another military child at that time, you can kinda understand what you're going through... so you have that commonality. So just my perception is if I tell other people, "oh hey I just got done deploying to Afghanistan, you know, two years ago and this is what I did and it was a really great thing, my children love it, now your children are my children's age or a couple years younger, you know, I highly recommend it." ... I think when you have somebody giving that testimonial, that really lends a lot more creed than just seeing a poster for the program. (Army Reservist, Enlisted)

Following this explanation, another participant in this research did not choose to participate in the program until it was suggested to him by other service members who had participated, although he had heard about UTR during his pre-deployment meetings:

Well, I heard about it while, first heard about it while we were, I guess before we were under way they talked about it at a pre-deployment brief, but I never, you know - And then during the work ups I know they were doing it but I didn't bother with it. And then you know I was talking to some people who did it, and I was like alright. (Active Duty Navy, Enlisted)

Another service member, who worked as a volunteer with UTR during his deployment, described how the knowledge of the program spread down the ranks:

Mostly the officers started reading first, because they tended to have a little more free time or they were a little bit, a few of them were a little bit older or had older kids at home... And then as more officers tended to read, they would go back to their units, their companies, and express it to others. (Army National Guard, Enlisted)

For many in this research, having the involvement of a CO was incredibly important to the success of the program on a given military installation or ship:

One of the things that was super helpful was that one of the leadership of the ship um, was a parent that wanted to do that. So he started it and basically was an advocate for it, and that helped a lot. Once there was somebody in that leadership realm that had done it, not only could I say, “Hey, so and so has done this already,” you know, and use it as encouragement to say like this is supported. You know, this is something that is good for everybody and not something that’s pulling you away from anything or whatever, this is a good thing. So I think that had a lot to do with it: that one of the senior leaders on the boat had done it on the ship. (Active Duty Navy, Chaplain)

We got an e-mail and they said, “oh we’re going to be doing these video recordings for people, and then you can send them to whoever.” And my supervisor came in and reiterated like, hey, you know you’ve got something you want us to do, so he let us have – it was a fairly slow week – so he let us have some time off to do [the recording]. (Active Duty Army, Enlisted)

A theme in both of these quotes was that the military members did not feel that making the recordings was taking them away from their duties while they were deployed. Whether it was because they were having a slow week and their supervisor specifically relieved them from duties so they could make a recording, or if this was conveyed more silently through supervisor support for the program, COs played an important role in how UTR was utilized by other military members.

Throughout all of the interviews, participants expressed that they wished more people knew about the program. Many participants suggested advertising the program in more FRG groups, pre-deployment meetings for active duty personnel, through the MWR, chaplains, ombudsmen, military member and/or military spouse magazines, and military affiliated Facebook groups as a way to get the word to more families.

Theme 8: UTR is not Associated with Military Member Re-Enlistment

When asked about the relation between use of UTR and a military member's continued service, servicemen unanimously agreed that they viewed their service in a different category

than UTR.

I think there's so many other considerations that are more pressing or larger... I don't think it popped in my head, "boy, if it weren't for United Through Reading, I would get out of the military, but since I have United Through Reading I'm going to stay in." I think that would be too much of a stretch. (Active Duty Army, Officer)

I've been in long enough that it's worthwhile to stay to me... United Through Reading is not a make or break but it's a nice perk... I don't think it really would make me stay in the military but it's a nice thing to have when I'm in the military, especially being wed. It does make being away from home a lot easier because you're able to kind of reach out to home. It's another avenue to reach out to home... [but] I've been in the military long enough that you see that yeah deployments suck, but it's just part of the job. (Active Duty Navy, Enlisted)

Like the seaman above, military members agreed that although UTR did not contribute to their desire to stay in the military, the program was a valued service that they wanted to see continue:

I don't think they're related... I would say that they're two different things. But being in the military and knowing about United Through Reading, I would want to make sure ... that this United Through Reading always stays there because I think it's a service that is hugely beneficial to people. (Active Duty Navy, Officer)

I think they're just two different categories and I don't think that they directly interact with each other, so I would say no, I loved the experience and like I said I would probably use again if I deployed again, but I don't see how that would affect my decision to stay or leave the military. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

Another participant, however, discussed that although UTR may not have a direct impact on the continued service of military members or their families, the program may have a more abstract impact, by helping service members stay connected to their families.

I think that participating in UTR, gave me another opportunity to connect to my children while I was deployed. And I think that one of the primary reasons why people leave or get out of the military is because of the big gaps that they have in their family lives when you deploy. So I think that in the same way that UTR has increased morale, I think it does that because it allows you to maintain those connections to the people that you care about back home. So I do think that there would be an effect in improving military retention by mitigating the biggest drawback of deployment. I mean there are other bigger drawbacks to deployment, but socially that's a fairly big on [laughs]. (Active Duty Air Force, Enlisted)

Quantitative Findings

Deployments and UTR Recording Use

Families varied widely in how they were able to communicate with their military member during periods of separation (Table 5.1). E-mail and instant messaging emerged as the most common forms of communication on a daily basis. Families used e-mail most often, with 84.2% of families reporting that they used this method on a daily or weekly basis. Phone calls were the next most widely utilized means of communication with loved ones, with 60.4% of families reporting that they had phone conversations with their loved ones at least weekly. Mail was used by the fewest number of participants, and families that did use physical mail reported doing so only on a monthly basis. Instant messaging was similarly only used by approximately three quarters of the participants, but those that did use instant messaging platforms primarily (42.1%) did so daily. Video calls were more spread out in terms of how often families were able to use them, but most (87.8%) reported having video calls with their military member at least once a month.

Table 5.1

Communication Strategies by Percent

	Never	Daily	Weekly	Monthly
Mail (n = 56)	25	1.8	16.1	57.1
Instant Message (n = 57)	24.6	42.1	17.5	15.8
E-mail (n = 57)	8.8	47.4	36.8	7.0
Video Call (n = 57)	12.3	15.8	28.1	43.9
Phone Call (n = 58)	17.2	19.0	41.4	22.4

When asked in an open-ended question where they heard about UTR, military members and caregivers differed widely in their answers. Military members most often cited their

Chaplain, the USO, or the MWR, though one person answered “friends,” one said “Command,” and two heard about it on their deployment. Caregivers heard about it through family, the USO, their Chaplain, command, friends, social media, pre-deployment briefings, and military support resources such as Fleet and Family, FRGs (and other spouse’s clubs), and Yellow Ribbon events. When it came to making recordings, 29 families did so at a UTR command site, 12 did so at an installation site, and four military members used the app. App participation is likely low in this study because the service began only a few months before the surveys went out.

Over two thirds of the families surveyed (69%) used their video recordings multiple times a week (Table 5.2). Very few families (eight) indicated that they only watched their videos a few times during their deployment. This supports the interview data, showing that families use their videos often. When this question was re-coded into two categories: Families that used their videos more than once a week and families that used their videos less than that, a Chi Square test revealed that children asking to watch their recordings was also significantly associated with watching the videos at least once a week: $\chi^2(58) = 3.880, p < 0.05$. This also supports the interview data where families talked about putting on their video recordings whenever their children asked for them.

Table 5.2

How Often Families Used Their Recording

	<i>n</i>	%
More than once a day	8	13.8
Once a day	13	22.4
A few times a week	19	32.8
A few times a month	10	17.2
A few times during the deployment	8	13.8

Families were asked to select all the times they had watched their recordings (Table 5.3). 98.1% of families indicated that they watched their recordings during a deployment. However, half of the respondents indicated that they used their video recordings during separations due to training, which are usually shorter in duration than deployments. This indicates that families find value in UTR, despite the length of their separation. Supporting this, many families also used their videos for TDY (43.1%) and irregular work hours (29.3%), both of which are also generally shorter separations. Less than a quarter of families used UTR during periods of Geobatching, or in other words families living in different states than their military member, often represents long periods of physical separation. Although this was not a large proportion of the sample, this could be for two reasons. The first is that, although it is growing in popularity, the majority of families do not engage in Geobatching, but instead relocate when their military member does. The second is that Geobatching may not involve the same communication constraints as other forms of communication; military members may have greater access to phone, video chat, and instant messaging platforms, reducing the perceived need for recorded messages. Finally, eight families used their video recording, even when their military member was home.

Table 5.3

When Families Used Their Recording

	<i>n</i>	%
During deployments	57	98.3
During separations due to training	29	50.0
During TDY separations	25	43.1
For irregular work hours	17	29.3
Geobatching	13	22.4
While the military member is home	8	13.8

Child Outcomes

The survey asked parents to respond with how much they agreed or disagreed to a number of statements regarding child outcomes. These are summarized in Table 5.4. Parents had an option to select "not applicable" (e.g. their child was too young to ask to watch the recordings), and for this reason the table reflects adjusted *n*-values after the removal of such cases.

Table 5.4

Child Outcome Agreement Statements, Adjusted N Values

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My child(ren) enjoy watching their recording(s) (<i>n</i> = 58)	91.4%	8.6%	-	-
My child(ren) ask to watch their recording(s) (<i>n</i> = 54)	75.9%	24.1%	-	-
My child(ren)'s love of reading as increased since participating in the United Through Reading program (<i>n</i> = 52)	42.3%	48.1%	9.6%	-
My child(ren)'s language and literacy skills improved after receiving and watching the recordings (<i>n</i> = 47)	34.0%	51.1%	14.9%	-
My child(ren)'s behavior improved after receiving and watching the recordings (<i>n</i> = 48)	45.8%	41.7%	10.4%	2.1%
My child(ren) have conveyed an increased interest in topics such as science and math after receiving and watching the recordings (<i>n</i> = 31)	29.0%	41.9%	22.6%	6.5%
My child(ren)'s overall academic development/performance improved after receiving and watching the recordings (<i>n</i> = 30)	33.3%	46.7%	2.0%	-
Watching the recordings has reduced separation-related stress/anxiety for my child(ren) (<i>n</i> = 56)	62.5%	32.1%	1.8%	3.6%

Every one of the families in the study agreed that their child(ren), regardless of age,

enjoyed watching the video recordings. For those families who felt the question was applicable, 100% also reported that their child(ren) asked to watch their recordings. Similarly, a large portion of the sample (90.4%) reported that their child(ren)'s love of reading increased since participating in the UTR program. A slightly lower number (84.1%) reported their child(ren)'s language and literacy skills improving since watching the recording. It bears noting that using UTR recordings more than once a week was significantly associated with language and literacy skill improvement in children: $\chi^2(58) = 4.386, p < 0.05$. Families were more divided when it came to behavioral outcomes. However, of the 48 families who answered this question, 87.5% agreed that their child(ren)'s behavior improved after participating the program. Families largely agreed (80%) that their child(ren)'s overall academic development/performance was improved after participating in the program. The low response rate to this question is understandable considering the majority of families indicated that the recordings were made for children 5 years old and younger. Families were much more diverse in whether they felt that the UTR program impacted their child(ren)'s interest in STEM topics. Here only 70.9% agreed, and 27 felt that the question did not apply to their family. Finally, 94.6% of families felt that watching the recordings helped reduce separation related stress and anxiety for their child(ren).

Although the relationship between how often families watched their recordings and a reduction in behavior problems was not statistically significant ($p=0.54$), a Pearson's chi square test revealed that families who watched their videos at least once a week were more likely to report reduced child behavior problems than families who watched their videos less often. The lack of a statistically significant relationship could potentially be due to the small sample size, thus the relationship between video usage and child behavior outcomes warrants further investigation.

The results of the child outcome measure as it was taken from the Blue Star Families Lifestyle Survey are presented in Table 5.5. This question was asked slightly differently than in the original survey in that families could choose the degree to which their child(ren) experienced each outcome: either moderately or to a greater extent. In the original survey, these two categories were combined. The majority of families (81%) reported that their child(ren) exhibited personal growth or resilience during the course of their military member's last deployment. Over two thirds (69%) indicated that their child(ren) had increased pride or confidence.

Table 5.5

Child Outcomes

	Did Not Experience	Experienced Moderately	Experienced to a Greater Extent
Personal Growth or Resilience	19.0%	60.3%	20.7%
Increased Pride or Confidence	31.0%	46.6%	22.4%
Separation anxiety, worry, sleep problems	17.2%	51.7%	31.0%
Behavior problems	27.6%	62.1%	10.3%
Reintegration challenges upon the service member's return	39.7%	50.0%	10.3%
Decreased academic performance (<i>n</i> = 57)	78.9%	15.8%	5.3%
Depression (<i>n</i> = 57)	70.2%	22.8%	7.0%

The other five outcomes are reported against the 2017 and 2018 Blue Star Family Lifestyle Survey findings for the national sample in Table 5.6. Although the UTR sample scored higher than the national sample on every measure, it is important to note two potential reasons for this. The first is the small sample size of only 58 families. The Blue Star Lifestyle Survey

reported much larger sample sizes, which could potentially moderate their outcomes. The second is the high likelihood that UTR experiences a sampling bias among their members. Families who are more vulnerable to the effects of military induced separations may be more likely to participate in UTR than families who are at a lower risk for negative child outcomes. This is supported by the high levels of agreement with the moderating effects of UTR on negative child outcomes. Although 72% of families reported that their chil(ren) experienced behavior problems to a moderate or greater extent, 87.5% felt that their children's behavior was improved after participating in the program. This is understandable too, considering that only 10.3% of the families felt that their children experienced behavior problems "to a greater extent," as 62.1% of these responses only experienced behavior problems "moderately." Because the Blue Star Families data were not broken up this way, it is not possible to determine whether their sample experienced a similar skew towards moderate outcomes. Similarly, although 60.3% of families expressed reintegration challenges upon their service member's return, the qualitative data clearly support the assertion that UTR helped make reintegration easier for families. Although 82.7% of families reported their child(ren) experiencing separation anxiety, worry, or sleep problems, 94.6% of families felt that UTR reduced stress and anxiety in their child(ren).

Table 5.6

UTR Child Outcomes Compared to National Sample

	2017 ^a	2018 ^b	UTR
Separation anxiety, worry, sleep problems	54%	57%	82.7%
Behavior problems	49%	53%	72.4%
Reintegration challenges upon the service member's return	28%	30%	60.3%
Decreased academic performance	18%	18%	21.1%
Depression	13%	16%	29.8%

^a Shiffer et al. 2017; ^b Sonethavilay et al. 2018

In light of this, it is incredibly important to not interpret these findings as indicative that UTR is not serving as a buffer between families and negative child outcomes, but instead understand that the families who do utilize the program potentially experience these outcomes at a higher rate. This question did not evaluate the relationship between UTR and child outcomes, but rather their existence. It is my suggestion, then, that these statistics should be understood as a baseline for UTR's participants rather than an evaluation of UTR's impacts.

Parent and Family Outcomes

Like in the interview phase of this research, every family who participated in this survey indicated that UTR improved their family's morale during times of separation. On individual levels (Table 5.7), 100% of military members and 97.2% of caregivers felt that participating in the program improved their personal morale. Similarly, a high number of families (96.5%) felt that having UTR recordings made their deployments or separations easier (Table 5.8). When it came to stress, 86.0% of the participants felt that UTR reduced caregiver stress and 93.1% of participants felt that UTR reduced military member stress. Although small, the difference in these numbers may be due to the differences in stress sources for military members and caregivers. Although military members may experience stress due to worry about their families or situational stress (such as that experienced in a combat zone), caregiver stress likely stems more over worry for their military member and the navigation of day to day life without the aid of their secondary caregiver. For the caregivers who were not married to their military members in this study, their stress may have been lower to begin with. Supporting the qualitative data, 98.3% of families felt that using their recordings helped them feel more connected during periods of separation. Finally, 100% of families felt that United Through Reading is a critical readiness and resiliency tool.

Table 5.7

Morale for Military Members and Caregivers

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Military Member: Improved morale through UTR (<i>n</i> = 21)	90.5%	9.5%	-	-
Caregiver: Improved morale through UTR (<i>n</i> = 35)	74.3%	22.9%	2.9%	-

Table 5.8

Family Level Outcomes

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Having the United Through Reading recordings has improved my family's morale during military induced separations (<i>n</i> = 57)	80.7%	19.3%	-	-
Having/making the recordings makes deployments/separations easier (<i>n</i> = 58)	74.1%	22.4%	1.7%	1.7%
Caregiver stress was reduced by using the UTR recordings (<i>n</i> = 50)	48.0%	38.0%	10.0%	4.0%
Military member stress was reduced by making UTR recordings (<i>n</i> = 51)	43.1%	51.0%	3.9%	2.0%
Utilizing the United Through Reading recordings makes my family feel more connected during periods of separation (<i>n</i> = 56)	80.4%	17.9%	1.8%	
United Through Reading is a critical readiness and resiliency tool (<i>n</i> = 57)	80.7%	19.3%	-	-

In terms of the impacts of the UTR program on retention and re-enlistment for service members, families were more divided than in the qualitative portion of the study (Table 5.9). 57.8% of military members felt that they had an increased willingness to continue their military service after participating in UTR, while only 37.1% of caregivers felt this way. Although in

each case more participants agreed that UTR had an impact on retention/re-enlistment than disagreed, it is important to note the high percentages (34.8% and 28.6%) of participants who felt that the question was not applicable. Like participants expressed in the qualitative portion of the study, this may be because military families feel that UTR is in a different category or unrelated to their willingness to continue their service.

Table 5.9

Impacts on Retention/Re-Enlistment

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
Military Member: Increased willingness to re-enlistment/continue my military service	39.1%	8.7%	13.0%	4.3%	34.8%
Caregiver: Increased willingness to support military member's re-enlistment/continued military service	17.1%	20.0%	31.4%	2.9%	28.6%

Benefits of UTR

Finally, the survey asked participants to select all of the benefits that they saw through UTR (Table 5.10). Family resiliency emerged as the top reported benefit by families, followed by strengthened family bonds during separation. Child outcomes such as increased literacy skills and reduction in problematic behaviors emerged as the least mentioned benefits, however this again may be due to the lower age range of children in this study. Families who used their video at least once a week were more likely to report that keeping their military member as part of their family routine was a benefit of UTR: $\chi^2(58) = 8.572, p < 0.01$. This supports the qualitative data and indicates that what families see as the biggest benefits of the program are family level outcomes, such as increased connection, family bonds, readiness, and keeping the military

member involved and remembered. This makes sense, considering these are the benefits that families most often used when they talked about the program to others.

Table 5.10

Benefits of UTR

	<i>n</i>	%
Family resiliency	56	96.6
Strengthened family bonds during separation	54	93.1
Increased family connectedness	51	87.9
Keeping the military member as part of our family routine	48	82.8
Helping my child(ren) recognize my military member	42	72.4
Family readiness	40	69.0
Increased desire to read	31	53.4
Personal readiness	29	50.0
Military Member	16	69.9*
Caregiver	13	37.1*
Increased literacy skills	26	44.8
Reduction in problematic behaviors	23	39.7

*Statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level

There was a significant difference between how military members and caregivers felt UTR impacted their personal readiness: $\chi^2(58) = 5.836, p < 0.05$. Military members were more likely to say that their personal readiness was a benefit of UTR than caregivers were. This is the only outcome that military members and caregivers differed significantly on.

Beyond the relationships that were already mentioned, how often families watched their videos was not related to any family or child level outcomes. The number of recordings families received, or how many deployments their military member had engaged in, similarly did not impact any of the family or child level outcomes. This indicates that the benefits of UTR were

not dependent upon families receiving a certain number of recordings, and that the benefits did not decrease with cumulative deployments. Similarly, for the most part (with language and literacy skill improvement being the exception) the number of times a family is able to watch their video does not increase or decrease the benefits they get from the program.

Considering everything, 100% of families reported that they were extremely likely to recommend UTR to another military family, and 98.3% ($n = 57$) reported feeling satisfied with their experience. For the question concerning the recommendation of UTR, one participant was removed because of a discrepancy in their answers: they reported that they were extremely satisfied with their experience, but extremely unlikely to recommend the program.

Suggestions

Families who participated in the interview phase of this research had two main suggestions for UTR moving forward: 1) provide more books for more advanced readers and 2) get the word out to more people. In this first point, several families commented that either they, or another family they knew, either had older children when they began using the program, or had used the program for so long that their children had grown older. As one spouse put it:

I can tell you the only thing that we have thought of that might help improve [UTR] a little bit is like [my children], as they're getting older they still want to take part in it but you know a lot of the books are story books or picture books, so they have said it'd be really great if they would have like maybe some chapter books or something a little bit older. [My husband] went around that and he went and got his own [books]. I know that [my son] had mentioned that before, he loves the books he got, but he was just like it would be neat if I could read like a chapter of this or whatever. (Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Enlisted)

She went on to explain that because some children might be reading at an advanced level at younger ages, a wider book selection would cater to their current reading level.

Just look at my 4 kids and their different levels at their different ages, you know, [my son] was pretty advanced in his reading, so at our youngest's age right (age 9) now he

would have already been reading big chapter books, you know. I think it would just be good to have a little bit of selection.

Families, particularly those who use the physical recordings sites, may benefit from a wider selection of books for different reading levels. This would cater both to families with older children and to families with younger children reading at more advanced levels. One of the service members who served as a volunteer for UTR at his USO while deployed suggested having a list of recommended books on site for different age levels and interests, as well as lists of other books from available authors. This may be particularly useful to families utilizing the app, but also to families who choose to purchase their own books for recordings.

I think definitely something that I could encourage United Through Reading would be maybe come up with a list of books for these ages. You might not have them available but you can say if your kid likes these types of books these are an age group appropriate and also by genre. So you might have say for example, and that was something that I was able to do and kind of tell people if you like these books, you'll definitely like this one, or if you like this author I would suggest some of his other books. (Army National Guardsman, Enlisted)

Although one of the more difficult suggestions to implement, seven of the families (the most for any one suggestion) talked about the need to get the word about UTR to more people. A Navy spouse said, "I guess, it's shocking to me how many people don't know about it...I dunno, in the military it's so hard, there's so many different benefits, and you think that everybody knows about them and they don't." Participants had suggested several different avenues for further advertising. The first was a focus on reaching spouses of military members rather than the military members themselves. Their reasoning was that spouses take care of many duties during a deployment, and would be able to encourage their military member to participate in the program. This suggestion was supported by both interviews and participant observation. Several times during the yellow ribbon events spouses would engage with the UTR staff and would then tell their service member that they needed to make a recording. In some

instances, the spouses would pick out the book and sign their service member up for a time slot. Similarly, in one of the interviews a spouse related that when she heard about the program she called and made an appointment for her husband at the recording site, although they had not talked about it previously. The involvement of spouses – particularly wives – in the deployment process makes them prime targets for future marketing.

Another suggestion was to coordinate with the calendar of deploying active duty units, and integrate UTR into the pre-deployment meetings and task lists. As one participant put it:

There are a lot of standard pre-deployment activities. Everybody has to get their shots, everybody has to get their gear, everybody has to have their training, I would just see if they could talk to some of the commanders and say could we insert this just as a 90 second infomercial if you will for United Through Reading, just to say, hey, while you're doing this, you know, um, shots at the lab or getting your gear or whatever, we're going to have a little site set up and do this. (Active Duty Army, Officer)

As this officer suggested, UTR could work to be integrated with the existing task list for deploying active duty troop, such as having an information table at the same location where service members get their vaccines. Other participants suggested increasing advertising at military family events, and through the family readiness groups (FRG).

With these strategies, participants recognized that the high turnover rate in the military on installations or deployments creates an uphill battle. Due to the positionality of UTR, access to different channels, such as the MWR, USO, or "command", may be restricted or dependent upon networking. However, these suggestions were included as an insight into where military families reported receiving their information from. Because the families who participated in this research reported actively advocating the program to other military families, using the existing network of UTR beneficiaries to gain access to various FRGs, Facebook groups, and pre-deployment meetings may be an effective path. Additionally, information about UTR should mirror the way that military families talk about the program, emphasizing the outcomes of family connection,

morale improvement, and other benefits of the program. Many of the families in this study expressed that reading was already an important part of their lives when they chose to participate in the program. This suggests that UTR beneficiaries may be biased towards those that already see the value of reading to their children. Marketing UTR (in addition to the ways the program is already doing) as a critical family resiliency tool may appeal to more diverse audiences.

With the exception of the suggestions above, the UTR App, which was released at the same time this research began, was seen by many as the solution to things they would have changed about the program, and in interviews and during participant observation the app received high praise and positive feedback. Several of the interviewees had not heard about the app before, so the interview served as a way to get their initial thoughts about its uses. One of the service members was so excited by the prospect that he downloaded the app while we were talking. Families felt that the app made UTR more accessible to families who were not currently experiencing a deployment, and several noted that this service would make it easier for them to use UTR for other forms of military induced separations. For families who experience these types of separations often, participants in the interviews seemed excited for the prospect to record new stories and add to recordings they had been using from their loved one's last deployment.

Additionally, families saw the app as providing them a new way to "close the circle" of communication with their service member by having their children make recordings of them reading to send back to their military parent. For older children, this could take the form of the child reading a chapter and then their parent reading a chapter. For younger children, the process may encourage them to practice reading. One mother at a Yellow Ribbon event pointed out that her children were required to read a certain number of minutes every night for school, and that

reading a story to their father would be a way to make this assignment more interesting.

Drawing on the themes that emerged from the research, this would also serve as a way of keeping the military parent involved in the homework routine.

Service members did not see the app as a replacement for more permanent recording stations, particularly those overseas and on Navy ships, as some were concerned about their internet connection while in these situations. However, the app was still seen as a positive supplement to these recording stations that they intended to use moving forward.

Deliverables

There were two agreed-upon deliverables for this project. The first was a 30-page white paper (Appendix E) and the second was a slide deck (Appendix F), each of which detailed the main findings of the research and suggestions for improving the UTR program. Both of these were submitted to UTR on November 30th, 2019. During the first part of December I had meetings with UTR staff to debrief them on the report findings and answer questions. The overall response to the research and the deliverables was incredibly positive. After my brief presentation, which focused on how the themes related to one another and specific recommendations and action items for the organization moving forward, the staff discussed what stood out for them in the research and how they would like to apply it moving forward. They focused their discussion on how they could use these findings when talking to potential beneficiaries and in marketing the program.

In addition to these deliverables, I provided the UTR Executive Board with a preliminary one-page overview of the main themes and expected research outcomes prior to the completion of the white paper and slide deck.

UTR has begun the development of a three year campaign that they are calling READiness365. The goal of this campaign is to promote military family readiness through the establishment and maintenance of a daily reading routine which includes the use of UTR video-recorded story time whenever a service member cannot be home to read to the children. The specific goals and processes of this campaign have been informed by this research, and as a part of the campaign UTR plans to communicate the results of the present study to beneficiaries, donors, and stakeholders throughout the coming months. They have distilled the findings presented here down to four communication points - impact on love of reading (theme 6), impact on child stress (theme 7), impact on communication (themes 1, 5, and 8), and impact on family morale (themes 2, 3, 4, and 9) - which will be released during some of their large events, such as Tribute to Military Families and their Storybook Ball. UTR has also reframed the survey they use for internal beneficiary data collection to reflect the themes identified in this research.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND PERSONAL REFLECTION

This chapter provides a discussion of the main research findings within the broader literature surrounding military families and culture. It focuses on the broad impacts of UTR on family and youth outcomes as well as military morale and readiness. I then explain how UTR operates within military culture, and how it does so through a positive psychology framework. In my conclusion, I detail how this research answers the four main research questions, as well as the limitations of this research and possible future work. I end with a reflection on how my own positionality as a military brat influenced and ultimately aided the research process.

Discussion

Family Outcomes

This research adds to a growing body of literature addressing the impacts of military induced separations on military children and families. Recently, these impacts have come to the forefront of discussions addressing military families, which are sparked by the growing concern military service members have for their children's well-being (Shiffer et al. 2017, Sonethavilay et al. 2018). These concerns are not unwarranted. It is common for children of all ages to face a variety of challenges, including higher anxiety (Chandra et al. 2010; Lester et al. 2010; Shiffer et al. 2017, Sonethavilay et al. 2018), depression (Jaycox et al. 2016, Shiffer et al. 2017, Sonethavilay et al. 2018), and other emotional difficulties (Chandra et al. 2010; Jaycox et al. 2016). Problematic behavior, including internalizing/externalizing behaviors, clinginess, aggression, risky behaviors, attention difficulties, destructive behaviors, withdrawal, and sleep difficulties are also common among military youth experiencing a deployment (Achenback and Ruffle 2000; Kelley 1994; Richardson et al. 2011; Aranda et al. 2011; McGuire et al. 2016;

Henderson 2006). The youth in this study are no different, with 82.7% having experienced anxiety related issues such as worry and sleep problems, 72.4% having experienced behavior problems, and 29.8% having experienced depression. Despite these challenges, 94.6% of families felt that participating in UTR helped to reduce stress and anxiety in their children, and 87.5% reported that their children's behavior improved since receiving and watching the recordings.

Previous findings indicate that higher family cohesiveness is related to a reduction in negative child behavior, however this moderating effect can be nullified as deployments have a significant negative impact on family cohesiveness (Kelley 1994). UTR strengthens family bonds during military induced separations such as deployments, and in so doing may account for the reduction in problematic behaviors experienced by families. Another way of interpreting these results is that making UTR recordings, whether the recordings were made immediately before a separation or shortly after the service member reached their destination, was a form of family preparation. Families who take preparation steps prior to experiencing a deployment tend to have fewer negative outcomes than those who do not (Meadows et al. 2017).

Additionally, several studies have found a connection between child outcomes and the mental health of caregivers during military induced separations (Barker and Berry 2009; Chandra et al. 2010; McGuire et al. 2016; Sonethavilay et al. 2018, Lester et al. 2010). Essentially, when parents have a higher capacity for coping, children also exhibit stronger coping skills. In light of this, the findings that participation in UTR reduced caregiver stress has important ramifications for child outcomes. Additionally, family level benefits such as family resiliency, strengthened family bonds, and increased family connectedness emerged as the top three benefits of participation cited by participants. All of this supports the conclusion that the positive impact of

participation in UTR on caregivers and the military family as a whole is significant, not only because it helped the caregivers, but because it also played a role in the further moderation of negative child outcomes. The improvement of these family level outcomes has a direct impact on the retention and re-enlistment of the service member (Sonethavilay et al. 2018; Barker and Berry 2009; Kelley et al. 2001). Thus, although service members and caregivers were adamant that UTR did not have a direct impact on their continued service, by improving family well-being and youth outcomes, UTR directly affected one of the major factors impacting a military member's continued service. Improving family well-being is also critical to maintaining positive morale.

Morale, Readiness, and Communication

In terms of the three major components of morale – psychological well-being, group solidarity, and sense of purpose – UTR improved morale by acting to improve psychological well-being. One of the most critical ways of improving troop morale, and alleviating boredom, is the ability to communicate with family members back home (Applewhite and Segal 1990; Bell et al. 1999; Greene et al. 2010). This research illustrates how participating in UTR improved morale for not only service members, but also their families. This is incredibly important, because a key component of service member psychological well-being is the well-being of their family (Park 2011; Hall 2008). Several participants reflected on this when they noted that they did better when they knew that their families had recordings to help them through times of separation.

UTR, as a means of communication, overcame not only the physical challenges of other forms of communication such as blackout dates, time zone differences, and youth disinterest, but also addresses the challenges presented in other research. Service members may purposefully

avoid telling their families the details of their experiences overseas, which can create a disconnect between the military member and their families (Grottman, Grottman, and Atkins 2011; Ender 1995; Durham 2010). Similarly, although the challenges experienced by military families and service members during a deployment are different, the experience can be trying for both parties. However, communication disconnects when using e-mail or phone can create the feeling that neither party understands what the other is going through, and can lead spouses to feel as if they are not supported on the Homefront (Grottman, Grottman, and Atkins 2011). Using UTR recordings as a means of communication helped to overcome this trend in several ways. Firstly, although service members are encouraged to include messages home to their families, the primary focus of the recording was on the reading of a children's book, not the discussion of day to day activities. This alleviated the expectation of information sharing beyond messages that are appropriate for children. The second addressed the feeling spouses may have of not being supported by their service member. This research shows that spouses did in fact feel that their service member was supporting them by making the recording, and spouses in interviews talked about using their recordings in ways that mimicked letting the children "hang out" with their service member so that the caregiver could get chores done or relax themselves.

Furthermore, research has indicated that more delayed forms of communication such as e-mail and letters provide a tangible item that service members can return to again and again, which improves psychological well-being (Carter et al. 2011). This research presents a similar finding, with implications for both service members and their families. The recordings gave families something that they could return to whenever a member of the family wanted to view the recording. The military chaplain with whom I spoke explained the uniqueness of the UTR recordings in the following way:

And I might use the example like I said, you know sending an e-mail is different than handwriting a letter, where a handwritten letter means something because you know that the time was taken so you hold onto that different than an e-mail. And I think United Through Reading is not just reading a book before you go to bed, which can become routine with kids, the thing that probably has the chance to be worn out because it's the one thing I've got that's fresh and new from mom or dad over the course of a long period. (Active Duty Navy, Chaplain)

Here he highlights that not only is the recording special because, like a handwritten note, the service member must take time to make it. Additionally, he notes that because the recordings are something tangible they are something that children can go back to, to the point of potentially wearing them out. A similar trend emerged for the service members. UTR staff emphasized the need to “close the circle” of communication by having families record videos of their children watching the recording to send them back to their service member. Service members in this study commented that both the videos of their children watching the recordings, and simply the chance to make another recording, gave them something to look forward to while they were gone. This relates to the larger literature that shows that both having something to look forward to and a means of alleviating boredom is key to improving both psychological well-being and morale (Hall 2008; Park 2011; Applewhite and Segal 1990). The positive impacts that UTR had on morale and readiness positions the program as a strong tool for family and service member resilience.

Positive Psychology and Resilience

In light of these findings, it is useful to interpret this research and the impacts of UTR within the framework of positive psychology. Positive psychology builds upon an individual's or group's strengths in order to achieve a desired outcome (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Here, UTR built resiliency by promoting the connection of military members to their families through the use of the video recordings. Some families sought the program out because

they already emphasized reading in their day to day lives. As one Navy spouse expressed, “this is perfect, right up our alley kind of thing.” When families use UTR already have a strong family culture surrounding the importance of reading, the recordings work to strengthen a skill that the family has already established and direct it towards the facilitation of resiliency by providing that strong connection between family and service member. Thus UTR built upon a family’s established strengths.

One of the strongest predictors of military family resilience is family cohesion (Sonethavilay et al. 2018; McCubbin and McCubbin 1988; McCubbin and Lavee 1986; Bowen, Orthner and Zimmerman 1983; Park 2011; Wong and Gerras 2010). This research shows that beneficiaries feel that UTR helped strengthen family bonds and foster connection between the members of a family. Through this, UTR helped facilitate family level resilience. The Army’s Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program bases its four components (emotional fitness, spiritual fitness, family fitness, and social fitness) in a positive psychology framework. Of these components, UTR worked to improve elements of family fitness (Gottman, Gottman, and Atkins 2011). UTR also had an impact on emotional fitness, which emphasizes focusing on positive emotions and experiences to promote coping and resiliency (Algoe and Fredrickson 2011). Focusing on the positive elements of an experience, rather than the negative ones, promotes emotional well-being and morale. By providing service members something to look forward to, UTR helped facilitate emotional fitness. Additionally, the positive experience of getting a break from the day to day tasks of being abroad and away from their families while reading a story also worked to improve psychological well-being in soldiers.

For families, getting UTR recordings in the mail gave both caregivers and children something to look forward to, and many participants commented that the program helped them

have fond memories of their deployment rather than only negative ones. In doing so the program also promotes emotional fitness at the family level as well as for soldiers. That UTR operates within a positive psychological framework is important because positive psychology is preventative rather than corrective. Focusing on building resilience in a preventative manner, rather than trying to correct problems once they occur, fits within the military culture (Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman 2011).

Military Culture

UTR was such a successful program in this research because it promoted resiliency and readiness (both of which are buzz words in military family services right now) and helped families cope with the frequent absences of their service member without focusing on the problems that can occur because of those separations. Because constant discipline against weakness, as discussed in Chapter 2, results in some military family being hesitant to engage in family services because it would mean admitting they were struggling (Hall 2008, 2011; Kizer and Menestrel 2019; Fenell 2008; Reger et al. 2008), UTR represented a culturally appropriate means of building resiliency by focusing on positive outcomes rather than deficits.

UTR alleviated other cultural barriers to resource use as well. For example, many military husbands have reported a stigma associated with accessing military resources that they perceive as being for women/female spouses only (Southwell and Wadsworth 2016). Because this program is framed primarily for children and family units, male caregivers may not experience the same stigma when using UTR, but would achieve the same benefits that women do. However, this research only had two male caregivers, and cannot provide a conclusion about this point. Further research is required to understand the ways in which male caregivers relate to the program.

That being said, the stigmas associated with accessing services, regardless of gender or military status, are usually associated not with the use of services themselves, but with admitting that an individual or family is experiencing hardship (Hall 2008, 2011; Kizer and Menestrel 2019; Fenell 2008; Reger et al. 2008). This violates cultural norms of stoicism and denial (Wertsch 1991; Hall 2008) and can result in disciplinary measures by others of the community (Foucault 1995). However, the use of preventative services that promote readiness and resiliency is strongly encouraged by the military. This is related to the cultural norm of the mission first mentality. Engaging in actions that promote readiness and resiliency prepare a family for the “mission.” Because family readiness is critical to service member readiness, and service member readiness is critical to the success of the mission, the military as an institution encourages families to participate in programs that improve family readiness and resiliency (Hall 2008, Park 2011). The fact that UTR is included as a community partner at Yellow Ribbon events around the country is indicative of the military’s perception of the program as benefit to families. Within the Foucauldian framework outlined in Chapter 2, this means that participation in UTR does not result in the same discipline and punishment that engaging in other family service programs does.

Both families and service members alluded to the mission first mentality as they talked about UTR. For several, the recordings were made more meaningful because they knew their military member had to take time away from their primary job in the field to read the books.

One spouse expressed this particularly eloquently, saying:

That he would take time from his busy schedule to think of us, to make a recording and to send to us, I thought that he was thinking of us, we felt loved, I felt loved. His job, his role as dad, you know is important to him. (Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer)

Here the interplay between the military mission and the family as greedy institutions (Segal

1986) is particularly evident, as her husband had to take time away from his military duties in order to manage a paternal role that is important to him. One of the service members also commented on this negotiation between family and his job:

She [will always have] like a remembrance of “hey, my dad took the time out of his schedule to sit down’ and I would hope she would appreciate that I was trying to read her books. (Active Duty Navy, Enlisted)

Like in the first quote, the service member here points out that he had to take time out of his schedule, his primary mission, to read books, and that he hopes that one day she will appreciate that he did that. However, participating in UTR while at the same time recognizing that making recordings takes one away from their primary mission demonstrates a navigation of demands from both the military and the family.

For other military members, this negotiation took the form of moderating their UTR use, maintaining a balance between contributing to their family and staying focused on their job:

I just did one book per recording. We were super busy and I probably could have taken time to do more, but I didn’t feel right to be away from, you know, my guys for too long. (Active Duty Marine, Officer)

Here again the importance of the mission emerges as a factor that prevented the service member from taking time in the recording room to read more than one book. However, like in the previous quote the fact that he made a recording despite his recognition of the time it would take demonstrates a navigation of two greedy institutions.

The Chaplain I interviewed had a different outlook on the relation of UTR to a soldier’s primary duties:

You know, this is something that is good for everybody and not something that’s pulling you away from anything or whatever, this is a good thing. (Active Duty Navy, Chaplain)

He felt that taking the time to make a recording was not something that was taking a service member away from his job, and because the program was good for soldier and family morale, it

was “good for everybody.” Here again the importance of UTR functioning within the discipline and punishment of the military institution comes into play (Chapter 2). Although creating a recording has the potential to take a service member away from their primary job tasks, which is frowned upon, the recordings ultimately serve to boost soldier and family morale, playing into resiliency for all parties, which is considered important. Thus although the mission first mentality is evident in this research, the program is promoted by higher ranking officers because of the impact it has on resilience.

The promotion of the program from CO’s and Chaplains had a moderating effect on the mission first mentality. Several service members said that they would not have known to use the program if their CO had not encouraged them to, and others talked about how UTR did not gain traction on their ship until the CO or another ranking officer used the program and began encouraging others to do so. Part of this is due to technical limitations: higher ranking officers have more free time to make recordings while “on duty” during a deployment. Another reason for this phenomenon is cultural, and relates back to the relative importance of rank and the chain of command (Reger et al. 2008; Hall 2008). Within a Foucauldian system of discipline and punishment, those who best exemplify correct behavior are promoted, allowing them to serve as both role model and enforcer (Foucault 1995). Thus, when CO’s utilize UTR, they in so doing demonstrate that use of the program is “correct,” which further promotes its use among lower ranking service members.

Beyond Yellow Ribbon events and the support of COs, UTR has support from the military at the highest levels of leadership. Mrs. Hollyanne Milley, the spouse of the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is the chair of UTR’s host committee for Tribute to Military Families, a program awareness event providing programmatic information to military

and congressional leadership. Because military leadership turns over so fast UTR does this annual event to ensure that leadership at the highest levels understand the program and the value. Additionally, Mrs. Ellyn Dunford, the spouse of the last Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, served as the Chair for this host committee for four years. The support of military spouses at this level of military leadership indicates support for UTR as a program.

UTR was also such a successful program because of its position as a military affiliated entity. The program was founded by a military family and is now run by military families, for military families. Although they do not advertise this at recording events, the insider knowledge held by staff about the challenges that military families face helps them relate better to their beneficiaries. As the divide between military affiliated families and civilians grows, it will become more and more important that programs providing services to military families demonstrate either shared cultural knowledge or cultural sensitivity (Hall 2008, 2011; Shiffer et al. 2017; Coll, Weiss, and Yarvis 2011; Henderson 2006). One drawback to this is that although UTR is run by military affiliated parties, it is not an official program of the United States Armed Forces. This limits the program's ability to advertise on base and gain access to events without invitation from a military point of contact. Despite that, this research demonstrates that UTR beneficiary families are active in their personal advocacy for the program, and that word of mouth from military families who have used the program can play a key role in influencing others to participate as well.

Moving forward, UTR is positioned to continue to provide critical readiness and resiliency tools to service members and their families. Military service requires near constant reunions and separations, and although the current operational tempo is high, these separations do not always come in the form of deployment: irregular work hours, training, geobatching, and

TDY's all contribute to military induced separations that families experience (Hall 2008). The release of the UTR app at the beginning of this research process offered participants a new way to engage with the program. Many participants reflected that they were excited that the app was "not just for deployments anymore," and that they would be able to utilize the program more often. Additionally, UTR, and the app in particular, are positioned to provide further support to National Guard and Reserve families. In addition to often being geographically isolated from the larger military community, while in an "inactive" status, both National Guard and Reserve families often do not qualify for military services and benefits, and may only utilize them while the service member is activated (Knox and Price 1999; Hall 2008; Henderson 2008). UTR is available to all military affiliated personnel, regardless of activation status, and as such could prove an important resource to families that are otherwise unable to access service.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research sought to address four main questions: 1) In what ways does participation in UTR impact a child's love of reading? 2) What are the impacts of participation in UTR on child behavior during and after military- related family separation? 3) What are the impacts of participation in UTR on morale and stress levels for military members and caregivers? and 4) How does participation in UTR impact military members' retention or re-enlistment in the military?

Impacts on Love of Reading

Participation in UTR facilitates a love of reading in children. In families where reading is already emphasized and children are already avid readers, UTR helps to emphasize and continue that love. For many families, this is because of the connection that UTR creates between families and their service member. The recordings become something special and represent a

special time for children to spend with their service member, which helps frame reading as special. Furthermore, although many of the children in the survey had not started reading yet, in families where children were older parents agreed that UTR helped improve language and literacy skills.

Impacts on Child Behavior

Although some families agreed that UTR contributed to a reduction in problematic behavior in their children, this was the least cited benefit by survey respondents. This may be because of the younger age range of the children in the families that participated in the survey. It may also be because the causes of the behavior problems that are experienced by military youth before, during, and after a deployment are complex and interrelated, consisting of military culture, age, number of deployments experienced previously, family resiliency and readiness, and personal resiliency to name a few. That 87.5% of the families surveyed, after controlling for those who felt the question did not apply, felt that their children's behavior improved after receiving and watching their recordings indicates that UTR does contribute to a reduction in child behavior problems in participating families.

Impacts on Morale and Stress of Caregivers and Service Members

UTR improved morale for every member of the family - children, caregivers, and service members - by helping them feel more connected to each other. For caregivers, watching the videos and being able to see their service member helped reassure them that they were safe, provided enjoyment, and in some cases provided much needed time to either relax or let the children "listen to dad" while the caregiver did other household chores. For service members, morale and stress reduction were achieved through two different avenues. The first is direct: making the recordings and/or watching their children's reactions to the recordings gave them

something to look forward to and provided them with a brief escape from their day to day duties. The second is indirect: knowing that their family was supported through their use of the recordings reduced military member stress, improved morale, and improved readiness because they were less worried about their family back home.

Impacts on Retention and Re-enlistment

Service members in the interviews were unanimous in their feelings that UTR, although a benefit that they would use again and recognize the benefits of, does not directly impact their desire to continue their military service. This is because service members view the UTR program in a different category than their motivations for serving in the military. Survey responses reflect this and show similar results for caregivers. However, because UTR reduces stress, reduces child behavior problems, supports spouses, and improves morale, and because family stress is one of the main reasons that military families choose to leave the service, it is a probability that UTR contributes to retention and re-enlistment in an indirect way.

Limitations

The homogeneity of the interview sample is one limitation of this research. Although the interview sample included families from the Navy, Army, Air Force, and National Guard, as well as a mixture of officers and enlisted personnel, in every family the caregiver was female and married to a male servicemember. I was unable to interview any families where the service member had made their recording for a child who was not their own (e.g. younger sibling, cousin, neighbor, godson, etc.) though I did help service members record stories for children in these relationships during participant observation. Additionally, I did not have the opportunity to interview any caregivers who were male, or any caregivers not married to their service member. In the same vein, I was also unable to interview any female service members. The effects of this

sampling bias were moderated in the survey. Although the sample of male caregivers was limited ($n = 2$), female service members accounted for 43.5% ($n = 10$) of the military member sample. The small sample size of only 58 respondents is also a limitation of the survey data.

Both the surveys and the interviews were limited by a self-selection bias of respondents. Although the recruitments scripts were pushed out to all UTR beneficiaries, only a small percent chose to participate in the survey, and even fewer elected to participate in an interview. Several people who opted to take part in the interviews reported doing so because UTR had had such a large impact on their family, and they wanted to do anything they could to help the program. This questions whether or not families who felt that UTR was more impactful were more likely to participate in this research than those who participated in the program but did not experience as pronounced benefits. If that is the case, then these findings may be skewed towards individuals with more positive experiences of UTR.

Future Work

Despite the limitations of this research, these findings can serve as a platform for future work. Although not feasible within the constraints of this thesis, it would be incredibly beneficial to conduct a longitudinal comparative study between families who participate in UTR and those who do not. Because of the interest of the organization into the program's effect on language and literacy skills, future research could use validated literacy measures to better understand – quantitatively – the impact that UTR has on these skills. Because UTR has been serving military families for 30 years, it may also be beneficial to conduct research with adult military children who were recipients of UTR recordings when they were younger.

Because of the sampling limits of this study, it would also be interesting to conduct further research to understand the effects of relationships on the impacts of UTR. Do the

benefits of UTR change when the child is receiving their video from a Godfather, older sibling, aunt/uncle, or cousin rather than from a parent? Are the effects different for caregivers in these situations? Many of the service members with whom I interacted through my participant observation with deploying Army Reservists intended to make their recordings for children in their lives who were not their own offspring. As UTR continues to promote using the program for any child in a service member's life, understanding the impacts that relationships have on the benefits of the program will become more important.

It is clear from this research that the families who use and participate in UTR feel that it is a critical family resiliency tool for their "toolbox", as several families called it. Every participant lauded the program for the impacts that it had on their family and themselves. Additionally, families in both the survey and the interviews discussed at length the impacts that UTR had on making reintegration easier, particularly in families with young children. Although participants suggested improving the book selection for more advanced readers and providing a means for more families to hear about the program, participants unanimously felt that UTR was a benefit to their families and something that they would use again in the future.

Reflection

My own positionality in this research made a big impact on my ability to talk to and relate with service members and their families, both in interviews and in participant observation. I myself grew up as a military brat, having two parents who served. Both my parents participated in the Air Force ROTC in college, and went on to become officers. Before I was born, they had the opportunity to serve both stateside and abroad, with long term stations in Germany and South Korea. Because of this I grew up with stories about both of their experiences in the service during the 16 years of their marriage before I was born. My mother

retired in 1995, the year I was born, during a large military downsizing that offered her additional benefits for taking an early retirement. We continued our service as a family for the next 12 years until my father retired in 2006. During that time, we lived in Florida, New Mexico, Washington, Arizona, and finally Utah. Although we were fortunate that my dad only deployed once to Afghanistan for three months while I was in third grade, he did have frequent short-term absences and TDY's. I have vivid memories of Christmas parties in the helicopter hanger on base, and doing our grocery shopping at the Commissary every few weeks.

That being said, because my dad retired while I was still fairly young, I spent the entirety of middle school and high school in an essentially civilian family. Both of my parents had civilian jobs and I did not have to experience any separations from them after 2006. This puts me in a somewhat odd position. I consider myself an Air Force brat, and will always consider myself one. It honors the service of my parents, and the memories I have of frequent moves and long periods where my dad could not be home with us. I can relate to other military brats; we have a connection of shared experiences (Wertsch 1991). However, I do not have the same experiences that my friends do who were older when their military parent retired. Does this make me less of a military brat? I do not know, but it does put me in a position between insider and outsider.

I have an emic understanding of military culture and the impacts of military service on children and families. I also have the status and instant connection with other military affiliated individuals that comes from being able to say that I am a military brat. However, I am enough removed from my time with the military that I also feel like an outsider looking in. In many ways I am accepted as a member of the in-group because of my father's service, but can still approach things in a systematic, impartial manner. Anthropologists sometimes talk about being

an insider as a detriment to valid study because we cannot be impartial within our own culture. However, there are also positives that are associated with a shared cultural understanding.

Although I did not always introduce myself as a military brat, in every interview my experiences in the military and my father's service came up. Sometimes it was when participants asked why I became interested in doing research with UTR. Other times it was because I used my own experiences to relate to my participants. In each case, the person I was talking to seemed to visibly relax after they learned I was military affiliated. They would talk about the experiences of a deployment and say things like, "I'm sure you understand," or "that's probably similar to what you went through." The divide between the experiences of civilians and military families is very real (Shiffer et al. 2017; Coll, Weiss, and Yarvis 2011; Henderson 2006). My positionality as a military brat helped to bridge that gap and establish an instant rapport with the people I was talking to.

It also helped me secure this research position in the first place and aided in my ability to talk to other military service providers. When Kara Dallman, my point of contact with UTR for this project, had me e-mail the UTR staff about this project for the first time, she requested that I include in my introduction that I was a military brat, and in our early meetings she asked me to explain to the other staff members how my background as a military child would help in the research process. Moving forward through the research, Kara always introduced me first as a master's student at UNT, and then as a military brat to other service providers such as the researchers for Blue Star Families and the people we met at the Military Child Education Coalition Annual Training Seminar.

Although this research would have been possible for someone without a military affiliation, it was certainly made easier by my background in military families and military

culture. My own experiences and knowledge helped inform the direction of my literature review, the questions I asked participants, and the ways I related to them during interviews. It is my belief that my own military background made this a stronger project than it would have been had this research been undertaken by someone without a military cultural background.

APPENDIX A
CAREGIVER INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hi, my name is Erica Hawvermale. It's good to finally meet you! Thank you so much for being willing to talk with me today. So just as a review this project is a part of my master's thesis: I am working with United Through Reading to help them understand how their video recordings are being used and the impacts that participation in the program has on families. I know it was on the informed consent, but I would just like to stress that you are under no obligation to answer every question. If there is a question or questions that you feel uncomfortable answering, we can skip those questions without any penalty to you. Please also know that if there is something you would like removed from the transcript, I can also do that.

Before we begin, do you have any questions about the research or the process?

I'm going to start with some basic questions:

1. What is your gender?
2. What is the gender of your military member?
3. What is your relation to the military member?
4. How many children are you the caregiver for?
Age of each
Gender of each
5. What is your military member's service branch?
6. Are they enlisted, or an officer?
7. And are they active duty or reservist?
8. Do you live on or off base?
9. How many times has your military member been deployed?
10. During the current (or most recent) deployment, how often were you able to communicate with your military member?

What form(s) of media did you use to communicate?

(Only for those who have a military member who is not currently deployed)

11. How long was the last deployment?
Was that a combat or non-combat operation?
12. (If more than once) Did they make recordings with UTR on every deployment?
13. How many stories/books are on each recording that you have?

Let's talk a little bit more about your videos and your experiences with UTR.

14. Can you verbally walk me through how you would use your video on a normal day?

Probes: Where do you watch the video; Does the child use their book, or just watch; Who is involved; What are you doing at the same time; How does your child/children interact with the video?

15. How did you use your video the first time?

16. Were you able to take a video recording of your children watching the video for the first time and send it to your military member?

If yes, tell me a little bit about that

17. How often did/does your child view the video?

Probes: Did this change at all over the course of the deployment.

18. How do the UTR recordings make *you* feel?

19. From your point of view, what kinds of impacts has UTR had on your child?

Probe: Do you feel it has impacted their love of literature at all?

20. Do you feel like UTR had any impact on your morale? Your service member's?

21. Can you describe any problematic behavior you notice with your child? Such as (Use as a framework for asking follow-up questions and probing):

Probe for before, during, and after deployment.

Anxious/ Depressed	Withdrawn	Sleep Problems	Somatic Problems	Aggressive Behavior	Destructive Behavior
Clingy	Acts too young	Not wanting to sleep alone	Aches and pains (without medical cause)	Defiant	Can't concentrate
Feelings hurt easily	Avoids eye contact	Trouble getting to sleep	Can't stand things out of place	Demanding	Eats/chews inedible objects
Looks unhappy	Doesn't answer	Nightmares	Constipated	Disobedient	Cruel to animals
Nervous, high strung, tense	Not getting along with peers	Resists going to bed	Diarrhea	Easily frustrated	Destroys own things
Over-tired	Acts like an adult	Sleeps little	Doesn't eat well	Jealous	Destroys other's things
Self-conscious	Lacks guilt for bad behavior	Talks/cries in sleep	Headaches	Fights	Eats non-food items
Shy	Refuses to be active	Wakes often	Holds breath	Hits others	Gets into everything
Fearful	Little affection		Nausea	Angry moods	Hurts others or animals accidentally
Sad	Little interest		Painful bowel movements	Punishment does not change behavior	Quickly shifts from one activity to another
Wants attention	Stubborn		Won't eat	Screams	Rocks head, body
	uncooperative		Vomits	Selfish	Smears B.M.
			Stomach aches	moody	
			Too concerned with neat/clean	Loud	

22. If you were to talk about UTR to another military family who hadn't heard of the program, what would you tell them?
23. Have you heard of the UTR app?
 - If so, what are your thoughts? How do you see your family using it?
 - If not, explain the app and get reactions
24. Do you have any recommendations for United Through Reading?
25. Before we stop is there anything else you would like to say about UTR and your experience with the program?

APPENDIX B
SERVICE MEMBER INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hi, my name is Erica Hawvermale. It's good to finally meet you! Thank you so much for being willing to talk with me today. So just as a review this project is a part of my master's thesis: I am working with United Through Reading to help them understand how their video recordings are being used and the impacts that participation in the program has on families. I know it was on the informed consent, but I would just like to stress that you are under no obligation to answer every question. If there is a question or questions that you feel uncomfortable answering, we can skip those questions without any penalty to you. Please also know that if there is something you would like removed from the transcript, I can also do that. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the research or the process?

I'm going to start with some basic questions:

1. What is your gender?
2. What is the gender of the person who takes care of your children during deployments?
3. What is your relation to that person?
4. How many children do you have?
 - Age of each
 - Gender of each
5. What is your service branch?
6. Are you enlisted, or an officer?
7. And are you active duty or reservist?
8. Do you live on or off base?
9. How many times have you been deployed?
10. During your most recent deployment, how often were you able to communicate with your family?
 - What form(s) of media did you use to communicate?
11. How long was the last deployment?
 - Was that a combat or non-combat operation?
12. How many times have you made recordings with United through reading?
13. (If more than once) Did you make recordings with UTR on every deployment?
14. How many stories/books are on each recording that you made?

Let's talk a little bit more about your videos and your experiences with UTR.

15. Can you walk me through the process of making your first recording with UTR?

Probes: Where did you make that recording? How did you feel while making the recording? Where/how did you learn about UTR and their recording program?

(if more than one recording) Was the experience similar for your other recordings?

16. Did you get to see a video of your child(ren) watching the recording you made?

If yes: what was your reaction?

If no: Would you have liked to see one?

17. Describe your relationship with your child/children?

Before, during, and after deployment

18. How did you child respond to you when you came home?

19. Can you describe any problematic behavior you notice with your child? Such as (use below chart as a guide for the researcher to ask follow-up questions):

Anxious/ Depressed	Withdrawn	Sleep Problems	Somatic Problems	Aggressive Behavior	Destructive Behavior
Clingy	Acts too young	Not wanting to sleep alone	Aches and pains (without medical cause)	Defiant	Can't concentrate
Feelings hurt easily	Avoids eye contact	Trouble getting to sleep	Can't stand things out of place	Demanding	Eats/chews inedible objects
Looks unhappy	Doesn't answer	Nightmares	Constipated	Disobedient	Cruel to animals
Nervous, high strung, tense	Not getting along with peers	Resists going to bed	Diarrhea	Easily frustrated	Destroys own things
Over-tired	Acts like an adult	Sleeps little	Doesn't eat well	Jealous	Destroys other's things
Self-conscious	Lacks guilt for bad behavior	Talks/cries in sleep	Headaches	Fights	Eats non-food items
Shy	Refuses to be active	Wakes often	Holds breath	Hits others	Gets into everything
Fearful	Little affection		Nausea	Angry moods	Hurts others or animals accidentally
Sad	Little interest		Painful bowel movements	Punishment does not change behavior	Quickly shifts from one activity to another
Wants attention	Stubborn		Won't eat	Screams	Rocks head, body
	uncooperative		Vomits	Selfish	Smears B.M.
			Stomach aches	moody	
			Too concerned with neat/clean	Loud	

Probe for before and after deployment.

20. Do you feel like UTR had any impact on your morale? Your family's?

21. Do you feel like participating in UTR has had an impact on how much you want to stay in the military?

22. If you were to talk about UTR to another military family who hadn't heard of the program, what would you tell them?

23. Have you heard of the UTR app?

If so, what are your thoughts? How do you see your family using it?

If not, explain the app and get reactions

24. Do you have any recommendations for United Through Reading?

25. Before we stop is there anything else you would like to say about UTR and your experience with the program?

APPENDIX C
CAREGIVER SURVEY

1. What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non Gender Binary
 - Prefer not to answer
2. What is the gender of your military member?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non Gender Binary
 - Prefer not to answer
3. What is your relation to the military member?
 - Spouse/Partner
 - Parent
 - Sibling
 - Grandparent
 - Aunt/Uncle
 - Other: [Textbox]
4. Is or was your military member: Active Duty Reserve National Guard
5. What is (or was) your military member's service branch?
 - Army
 - Air Force
 - Marines
 - Navy
 - Coast Guard
6. Are they: Enlisted NCO Warrant Officer Officer
7. Where do you live: In military housing Not in military housing
8. How many times has your military member been deployed? [Textbox]
9. During their most recent (or current) deployment, what form(s) of media did you use to communicate and how often?
| Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Never|
 - Mail
 - Instant Message/Text

- E-mail
- Video Chat
- Phone Call

10. How many total recordings with United Through Reading have you received from your military member?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10+

11. Where/how did they make the recording?

- Command Site
- App
- UTR Installation Site
- Other: [Textbox]

12. Where/how did you hear about UTR?

[Textbox]

13. How many children watched the first recording you received, how old were they, and what gender are they?

Age	Gender

14. How many children watched the most recent recording you received, how old were they, and what gender are they? If you have not made more than one recording, please list how old the children in the previous question are now.

Age	Gender

15. How have your child(ren) been affected by the military member’s deployment(s)? Please indicate if any of the following has affected your child(ren) moderately or to a greater extent:

	Moderately	Greater Extent
Personal growth or resilience		
Increased pride or confidence		
Separation anxiety, worry, sleep problems		
Behavior problems		
Reintegration challenges upon the service member’s return		
Decreased academic performance		
Depression		

16. When do you use your United Through Reading recordings? (Check all that apply)

- During separations caused by deployments
- During irregular work hours
- During separations caused by training
- During separations caused by TDY
- During periods living in separate locations
- While my military member is home
- Other: [Textbox]

17. How often did your children watch the recordings during your military member’s most recent or current deployment/separation?

- More than once a day
- Once a day
- A few times a week
- A few times a month
- A few times during the deployment

18. Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

- Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | N/A
- a. My child(ren) enjoy watching their recording(s)
- b. My child(ren) ask to watch their recording(s)
- c. My child(ren)'s love of reading has increased since participating in the United Through Reading program
- d. My child(ren)'s behavior improved after receiving and watching the recordings.
- e. My child(ren)'s language and literacy skills improved after receiving and watching the recordings.
- f. My child(ren) have conveyed an increased interest in topics such as science and math after receiving and watching the recordings
- g. My child(ren)'s overall academic development/performance improved after receiving and watching the recordings.
- h. Having the United Through Reading recordings has improved my family's morale during military induced separations
- i. Participating in the United Through Reading program improved my own morale
- j. Having the recordings makes deployments/separations easier
- k. Using my recordings has increased my willingness to support my military member's re-enlistment/continued service
- l. Watching the recordings has reduced separation-related stress/anxiety for my child(ren).
- m. My separation-related stress was reduced by using UTR recordings.
- n. My military member's stress was reduced by making UTR recordings.
- o. Utilizing United Through Reading recordings makes my family feel more connected during periods of separation.
- p. United Through Reading is a critical family readiness and resiliency tool

19. As you see it, what are the benefits of participating in United Through Reading on your family?

- ___ personal readiness
- ___ family readiness
- ___ family resiliency
- ___ increased literacy skills
- ___ increased desire to read
- ___ strengthened family bonds during separation
- ___ helping my child(ren) recognize the military member when they return home

- keeping the military member as a part of the family routine
- increased family connectedness
- reduction in problematic behaviors
- other: [Textbox]

20. How likely are you to recommend United Through Reading to another military family?

Very likely | Likely | Not Likely | Not Likely at all

21. How satisfied were you with your experience?

Extremely satisfied | Satisfied | Not satisfied | Extremely not satisfied

22. Do you have any suggestions or further comments?

[Textbox]

APPENDIX D
SERVICE MEMBER SURVEY

1. What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non Gender Binary
 - Prefer not to answer
2. What is your relation to the adult(s) you sent your recording to? (Check all that apply)
 - Spouse/Partner
 - Parent
 - Sibling
 - Grandparent
 - Aunt/Uncle
 - Other: _____
3. Are you: Active Duty Reserve National Guard
4. What is your service branch?
 - Army
 - Air Force
 - Marines
 - Navy
 - National Guard
 - Coast Guard
5. Are you: Enlisted NCO Warrant Officer Officer
6. Where do you live: In military housing Not in military housing
7. How many times have you been deployed? _____
8. During your most recent (or current) deployment, what form(s) of media did you use to communicate with your family and how often? (Check all that apply)
 - | Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Never|
 - Mail
 - Instant Message/Text
 - E-mail
 - Video Chat
 - Phone Call

9. How many total recordings with United Through Reading have you made?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10+

10. Where/how did you make the recording?

- Command Site
- App
- UTR Installation Site
- Other: [Textbox]

11. Where/how did you hear about UTR?

- [Textbox]

12. How many children watched your first recording, how old were they, and what gender are they?

Age	Gender

13. How many children watched your most recent recording, how old were they, and what gender are they? If you have not made more than one recording, please list how old the children in the previous question are now.

Age	Gender

14. How have the children you referenced in questions 12 and 13 been affected by your deployment(s)? Please indicate if any of the following has affected these children moderately or to a greater extent:

	Moderately	Greater Extent
Personal growth or resilience		
Increased pride or confidence		
Separation anxiety, worry, sleep problems		
Behavior problems		
Reintegration challenges upon the service member's return		
Decreased academic performance		
Depression		

15. When does your family use your United Through Reading recordings? (Check all that apply)

- During separations caused by deployments
- During irregular work hours
- During separations caused by training
- During separations caused by TDY
- During periods of living in separate locations
- While you are home
- Other: [Textbox]

16. How often did your children watch the recordings during your most recent or current deployment/separation?

- More than once a day
- Once a day
- A few times a week
- A few times a month
- A few times during the deployment
- I don't know

17. Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | N/A

- a. The child(ren) enjoy watching their recording(s)
 - b. The child(ren) ask to watch their recording(s)
 - c. The child(ren)'s love of reading has increased since participating in the United Through Reading program
 - d. The child(ren)'s behavior improved after receiving and watching the recordings.
 - e. The child(ren)'s language and literacy skills improved after receiving and watching the recordings.
 - f. The child(ren) have conveyed an increased interest in topics such as science and math after receiving and watching the recordings
 - g. The child(ren)'s overall academic development/performance improved after receiving and watching the recordings.
 - h. Having the United Through Reading recordings has improved my family's morale during military induced separations
 - i. Participating in the United Through Reading program improved my own morale
 - j. Having the recordings makes deployments/separations easier
 - k. Using my recordings has increased my willingness to re-enlist/continue my military service
 - l. Watching the recordings has reduced separation-related stress/anxiety for my child(ren).
 - m. My separation-related stress was reduced by making UTR recordings.
 - n. The child(ren)'s Caregiver's stress was reduced by using UTR recordings.
 - o. Utilizing United Through Reading recordings makes my family feel more connected during periods of separation.
 - p. United Through Reading is a critical family readiness and resiliency tool
18. As you see it, what are the benefits of participating in United Through Reading on you and your family? (check all that apply)
- personal readiness
 - family readiness
 - family resiliency
 - increased literacy skills
 - increased desire to read
 - strengthened family bonds during separation
 - the children recognize me when I return home
 - keeping me as a part of the family routine
 - increased family connectedness

__ reduction in problematic behaviors

__ other: [Textbox]

19. How likely are you to recommend United Through Reading to another military family?

Very likely | Likely | Not Likely | Not Likely at all

20. How satisfied were you with your experience?

Extremely satisfied | Satisfied | Not satisfied | Extremely not satisfied

21. Do you have any suggestions or further comments?

[Textbox]

APPENDIX E

CLIENT DELIVERABLE – WHITE PAPER



Maintaining a Living Relationship: The impacts of participation in United Through Reading

United Through Reading

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Executive Summary

Military families experience a wide range of military induced separations, from tours of duty overseas to irregular work hours. Between this and an increased operational tempo, military families, and particularly military children, are under constant stress. This can lead to increased anxiety, behavioral problems, and academic difficulties in children, as well as family and service member stress. All of this can contribute to a reduction in service member and family readiness. United Through Reading (UTR) is positioned as a service to military families experiencing these separations. Through helping service members make recordings of themselves reading books to the children in their lives, United Through Reading seeks to improve family readiness and resiliency and promote a love of reading in children.

Although UTR is backed by research, they have not yet conducted an evaluation of their specific program. To this end, they sought to address the following questions:

1. **In what ways does participation in UTR impact a child's love of reading?**
2. **What are the impacts of participation in UTR on child behavior during and after military- related family separation?**
3. **What are the impacts of participation in UTR on morale and stress levels for military members and caregivers?**
4. **How does participation in UTR impact military members' retention or re-enlistment in the military?**

To address these questions, a mixed-methodological approach was used, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods:

- **Participant Observation** at 3 yellow ribbon pre and post deployment events for Reserve and National Guard troops
 - Geared towards understanding how participants interacted with the program
- **Semi-Structured Interviews** with service members and caregivers who had used United Through Reading in the past
 - 19 total interviews: 10 service members and 9 caregivers
- **Survey** of beneficiaries who had used United Through Reading in the Past
 - 58 total surveys: 35 caregivers and 23 service members

Findings

Theme 1: United Through Reading facilitates feelings of connection between service members and their families during times of military induced separation.

Theme 2: Families who used United Through Reading attributed lower reintegration difficulties to the program. The recordings were seen as a way to keep the memory of the service member in younger children, and use of the recordings served to keep the service member as part of the family's routine.

Maintaining a Living Relationship

Theme 3: Although United Through Reading is sometimes seen as a program to help children with military separations, caregivers reported experiencing significant benefits as well, including reduced stress and improved morale.

Theme 4: United Through Reading helped improve the morale of service members, caregivers, children, and the family unit as a whole.

Theme 5: Recordings overcome many of the challenges and constraints associated with other forms of communication, such as time zone differences, connectivity problems, child interest, blackout dates, and accommodating children's requests to see their service member.

Theme 6: United Through Reading contributes to a love of reading in children who were not already avid readers and emphasizes a love of reading in children who already had one by making reading something special.

Theme 7: Child behavior problems as well as stress and anxiety levels were moderated by participation in the United Through Reading program.

Theme 8: When families talk about United Through Reading, they emphasize the benefits that they experienced, such as increased feelings of connection with their service member, the ease of recording use over other forms of communication, and feeling like their service member was still an active part of their lives.

Theme 9: Service members agreed that United Through Reading does not directly impact their desire to re-enlist or continue their military service, however the program's impacts on family and child well-being may contribute indirectly to military member retention.

Benefits of UTR : Families cited family resiliency, strengthened family bonds during separation, and increased family connectedness as their top three benefits of United Through Reading, although keeping the military member as part of the family routine, helping children recognize their service member, family readiness, and an increased desire to read were all mentioned by more than half of the survey respondents.

Suggestions

Participants in the interviews had two main suggestions for United Through Reading moving forward:

- 1. Provide more books for advanced readers**
- 2. Get the word out to more people through focused attention on spouses, deploying active duty unit briefings/meetings, and family readiness groups.**

For the first point, participants noted that this would meet two needs: It would help older children benefit from the program and it would be more engaging to younger children that are more advanced readers. For the second point, participants suggested targeting spouses and active duty deployment briefings, as well as family readiness groups. Because beneficiaries already promote the program to other military families, one potential way to facilitate broader program reach would be to network with families who have already used the program in order gain access to their groups, communities, and resources.

Barring these two suggestions, the new United Through Reading App addressed many of the suggestions and needs for improvement that participants saw, and many were excited for the prospects that the app offered. Several families mentioned wanting to use the app to record their children reading books to send back to their service member, as a way of closing the communication circle.

Conclusion

United Through Reading had a positive impact on each of the research question areas. Participation in the program helps to foster a love of reading children, for both those who are already avid readers and those who are not. The program also helps moderate child behavior problems, while reducing stress and anxiety in children. For adults, United Through Reading improved morale and reduced stress for both service members and caregivers. Although United Through Reading did not have a direct impact on military member retention and re-enlistment, the impacts that it has on military families more broadly may contribute to a service member's choice to continue their military service.

It is clear from this research that the families who use and participate in United Through Reading feel that it is a critical family resiliency tool. Every participant lauded the program for the impacts that it had on their family and themselves. Additionally, families in both the survey and the interviews discussed at length the impacts that United Through Reading had on making reintegration easier, particularly in families with young children. Although participants suggested improving the book selection for more advanced readers and providing a means for more families to hear about the program, participants unanimously felt that United Through Reading was a benefit to their families and something that they would use again in the future.

“Deployments can be very hard on military families, especially with this last conflict where people were going so frequently and being 2, 3, 4, 5 deployments sort of thing and being away from children during so many parts of their growing up. So, I think that it is such an important – anything that can be done to mitigate that absence of a parent in a child's life is, I think, tremendously valuable. And so while this is just one thing that provides a tiny bit of solace or a balm or a little bit of assistance, the need is huge and so I think that anything that can be done in that venue is critically important, just because I think that most people that are not military don't recognize nor fully understand the sacrifices that military members make. You know, there's very few people's jobs that you know, will take them away from their family for a year with not seeing them at all. There's a lot of people that travel a lot, you know, but you usually see them on the weekends or you know they're home for a week or something like that. Very few jobs say, “Hey I need you to go to Cleveland for a year. You can't come back at all.” So I think that absence to be like oh, I missed every episode of my kid's like fifth year, when my kid was five I never knew my kid to be five, because I missed Christmas, I missed birthday, I missed first day of school, I missed every play they did, I missed every homework assignment they did, I missed everything that entire year, and I don't think most civilians understand that, you know, and so that's kind of a long winded answer to be like anything we can do to attenuate/mitigate that absence I think is very valuable.” –Active Duty Marine, Officer

Background Information

United Through Reading (UTR) is a non-profit organization who's goal is to, **“help service members stay connected to the children in their lives through all of the separations of military life.** Whether separated due to duty, training, classes, work-shifts, or deployments, UTR is there to foster bonds, promote resiliency, and build literacy” (United Through Reading 2019). To this end, **UTR records videos of service men and women reading children’s stories either during or before a family separation.** A copy of the recording and a book is provided to the military member’s children so that they may watch and read during these times of military induced separation. These book recordings can be more reliable than phone or video calls during a deployment, and serve as a way to **maintain family bonds during separation.**



Military Children and Families

Family separations, especially the long separations caused by a deployment, have significant impacts on children. In a recent survey, the impact of the military on children's well-being and the impact on their education ranked in the top 5 most concerning issues for spouses, and the top 6 for military members (Blue Star Families 2018). During a deployment, children of military service members often experience behavioral changes, including anxiety, depression, clinginess to the remaining caregiver, and difficulty reintegrating the military member upon their return (Chandra et al. 2011; Lester et al. 2010; Jensen, Martin, and Watanabe 1996; Barker and Berry 2009).

Additionally, the mental health of the children's caregiver can have a significant impact on children during deployment (Chartrand, Frank, White, and Shope 2008; Barker and Berry 2009). Cumulative deployments can also have a negative impact on children's academic performance, both in test scores and in their ability to focus and participate in school activities (Richardson et al. 2011; Aranda, Middleton, Flake, and Davis 2011)

Because maintaining family cohesion helps with coping during times of separation, communication between children and their military member is critical (Kelley 1994; Drummet, Coleman, and Cable 2003). Although the use of recorded stories like the ones made through UTR is not interactive communication, "tape recording a number of bedtime stories to be played for the children" has been recommended as a means of increasing communication and supporting kids through a deployment (Drummet, Coleman, and Cable 2003, 284).

The effects of a deployment on family cohesion and family stress not only impact youth outcomes, but also have a significant effect on military members' retention and re-enlistment as well (Barker and Berry 2009; Rosen and Durand 1995; Kelley et al. 2001). Indeed, concerns about the impact of military service on their family and lack of time with their family are the top reasons for why current military members say they would leave, and the top reasons for why veterans did (Blue Star Families 2017).

Research Questions and Objectives

United Through Reading is concerned not only with helping children cope with the separation from a parent, but also the impact of separations on caregivers and military members. Because video-recordings have been suggested as a means to improve family communication, participation in UTR by military families may not only help military children, but also the family unit as a whole. Although UTR is backed by this research, they have not yet conducted an evaluation of their specific program. To this end, they sought to understand, according to participants:

1. In what ways does participation in UTR impact a child's love of reading?
2. What are the impacts of participation in UTR on child behavior during and after military-related family separation?
3. What are the impacts of participation in UTR on morale and stress levels for military members and caregivers?
4. How does participation in UTR impact military members' retention or re-enlistment in the military?

The results of this research are presented here and in a slide deck as deliverables to United Through Reading. Additional literature review, theory, and discussion will be published through the author's master's thesis, available through the University of North Texas Digital Commons.

Methodology

Participant Observation

Participant observation is "a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning both the implicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and culture....As a way of knowing about the world of others, it provides a particular and unique way of generating novel understandings of the participants in our research" (Musante 2015, 251). Participant observation was conducted throughout the research process at three separate Yellow Ribbon events that United Through Reading attended. These one to three-day informational conferences provide military members and their families with critical information related to their deployment, and invite "community partners" to set up tables to share information about resources with participants. At all three events United Through Reading had a community partner booth and gave out information regarding their services, provided free books to the families in attendance, and had a recording room set up where military members could record themselves reading a book.

This participant observation provided a window into the interactions service members have with their families and the things they have to negotiate as they prepare to leave for a deployment or after they come home. It also provided a first-hand account of how individuals react to and interact with United Through Reading when they learn about the program and when they make recordings. This was crucial to coming to a greater understanding of how families interact with United Through Reading as a program.

Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to understand how military families used and interacted with their videos, and the impact those recordings had on the military member, the caregiver, and the children in regard to stress, mental health, morale, and support. Beyond that, the interviews were geared to understand how military members approached making their recordings: how did they hear about UTR? What was their recording experience like? How did they choose their books and how did the experience of reading for their children make them feel? For caregivers these interviews provided an in depth look at how they used the videos in their day to day lives and the impacts that they saw those videos having on their children. These interviews provided the rich and detailed "stories" of this project and informed the creation of the survey form later on. The interviews were conducted virtually via Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, or phone call depending on participant preference. The interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes, with the exception of one that lasted 70 minutes, and all but one of the interviews were recorded. This resulted in 10 hours of interview material.

Nineteen individuals were interviewed about their experiences with United Through Reading. Two of these participants were married to each other. Ten of the participants were service members, and 9 were caregivers. All of the caregivers were military spouses, and all were female. All of the military members were male and made their recordings for their own children/spouses. Ten participants were affiliated with the Army (6 caregivers, 4 service members), 6 were affiliated with the Navy (3 caregivers, 3 service members), 2 were Air Force service members, and 1 was a Marine. The sample contained 14 active duty families, three National Guard families, and two Reserve families. All National Guard and Reserve families were Army. Eight participants lived in families where the military member was enlisted, 1 lived in a family where her husband was a warrant officer, and 8 participants lived in families where the military member was an officer. One participant was a military chaplain, and one service member made recordings both when he was enlisted and after he became an officer.

Surveys

The survey was geared towards understanding what the impacts of participating in United Through Reading were on children, caregivers and military members. The questions were informed by the interviews, and were designed to provide a more generalizable set of data for United Through Reading to use in their informational materials and grant applications moving forward. Questions covered the same topics as the interviews: military related information (rank, activation status, branch); who they made their recordings for, the age and genders of those children; how often they watched the videos; the impacts on morale

for caregivers and service members; the impacts on stress for caregivers and service members; the impacts on child outcomes such as behavior, stress, reintegration, depression, and academic achievement; the impacts of the videos on military retention/re-enlistment; whether they would recommend UTR to another military family; and any suggestions they had.

Child Outcomes: In order to understand how children who receive United Through Reading recordings differ from the larger military population, the surveys replicated a question found on the Blue Star Families Lifestyle Survey (2017, 2018). This question asked whether children had experienced personal growth or resilience; increased pride or confidence; separation anxiety, worry, or sleep problems; behavior problems; reintegration challenges upon the service member's return; decreased academic performance; or depression. Because Blue Star Families surveys military families across branches and activation status, and reports this data as percentages, they are representative of the national military population and serve as the comparison group for the present survey. Permission to use this question was obtained from Blue Star Families prior to survey distribution through their informal alliance with United Through Reading.

58 total surveys were collected between the online and offline versions. 35 (60%) of these were caregiver surveys and 23 (30%) were military member surveys. Of the military members who participated 56.5 % were male (n = 13) and 43.5% were female (n = 10). Of the caregivers, only 2 were male (5.7%). All of the caregivers who participated in the survey were married to or partners of their military member. However, the military members who participated in the survey had sent recordings to spouse/partners, parents, siblings, and aunts/uncles. The demographics of the entire sample, both military and caregiver, are provided in Table 1.

The number of deployments experienced by the military members of the families who participated in this phase of the research ranged from 1 to 12, with an average of 4.17 (sd = 2.63). Families were asked to report how many recordings they had sent home/received from their military member, with a scale ranging from 1-10+. The average number of recordings was 4.63 (sd = 2.8).

Table 1. Demographic Descriptive Variables

Gender	N	%
Male	15	25.8
Female	43	74.1
Relationship		
Spouse	49	84.4
Parent	5	8.6
Sibling	1	1.7
Aunt/Uncle	2	3.4
Activity Status		
Active Duty	54	93.1
Reserve	2	3.4
National Guard	2	3.4
Service Branch		
Army	24	41.3
Air Force	3	5.1
Navy	20	34.4
Marines	11	18.9
Rank		
Enlisted	10	17.2
NCO	3	5.1
Warrant Officer	1	1.7
Officer	44	75.8

Findings

Qualitative and quantitative data from this research are presented together and organized by the themes that emerged in the qualitative phase of the study. In the survey, one of the questions asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements, with "not applicable" being a potential answer. For these statements, which are located throughout the report, families who felt a statement was not applicable to them were removed from the analysis. The percentages reported reflect this adjustment. Response frequencies for every non-demographic question on the survey are located in the Appendix.

Theme 1: UTR Facilitates Connection Between Military Members and their Families

Overwhelmingly, military members and their families felt that having and using their United Through Reading recordings helped to facilitate a feeling of connection between military members and their families. Of the 19 individuals interviewed, 15 specifically used the word "connection" when describing this interaction in responses to questions about the impacts that using their recording had on their family, though every participant generally talked about UTR helping to maintain a family bond during deployments. The theme of connection pervades through almost every other theme as well, making it one of the most prominent and overarching impacts of the United Through Reading program. Connection, for many participants, meant that they felt like they were still present with their family even when they were separated by distance.

"I saw [UTR] as an opportunity to connect with my daughter in a way that's as close as possible to me being there reading a story to her, something as simple but as powerful as that... But she really loved it too, it was like the book was that connection between you know, between me and her. At that moment we were both doing the same thing at the same time, looking at the same time. And she didn't even know I was using the book that she had in her hands." -Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

For others this feeling of connection stemmed from feeling as though they were still part of their family's routine. For example, when families used the videos as part of their nightly routine, spouses commented that it felt like their military member was still present and still an active participant in the household. Half of the families who participated in the interviews would watch their videos every day or nearly every day. Most incorporated the videos into their bedtime routine, which made them feel like "daddy" was reading them a story. However, families would also use the videos during the day or when children specifically asked for them.

"We would get up in the morning and they would be like, 'Let's watch Daddy' and it's like, 'okay' I didn't mind!" -Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer

In the surveys, a statistically significant relationship emerged between children asking to watch the recordings, and whether or not a family watched their recordings more than once a week ($\chi^2(58) = 3.880, p < 0.05$).

69%

Over two thirds of the families surveyed used their video recordings multiple times a week

Integrating UTR into a routine not only helped families during separations. For families who had used UTR before, having a routine already set in place for how they used their videos helped children transition from pre-deployment to deployment.

"Shoot, he did a four day tour or four day training in Texas and I mean my kid was just like, she knows the drill. The first night dad's always gone we go out to eat at a restaurant, [and] we usually go take her to something dumb like iHop or McDonalds or whatever. And then the second night we always watch a daddy video. So for four days she was like I want food, then I want a daddy video. [interviewer: "And she's good"] You know she's good, it's her routine now." Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Officer

For this spouse, although they have not experienced a lengthy deployment for some time, her husband is required to attend shorter trainings and ship duty weekends often. Their United Through Reading recordings help create a routine for their daughter around these separations that make them easier.

For some, United Through Reading served as a crucial way for them to “meet” and begin to foster a bond with children that were born while the military member was away. It is not uncommon for military spouses to give birth while their husbands are deployed. For some families, United Through Reading served as a mechanism for their newborns to “meet” their fathers. This was the case for three of the families in this study. Similarly, for children who were very young when their military parent deployed, United Through Reading recordings served as a way to remember that parent while they were gone. For military members, the fear that younger children would forget them while they were deployed emerged as a prominent concern. Utilizing the video recordings helped mitigate that concern because they were seen as a way to not only maintain a connection, but also feel like they were still playing a role in their child’s life.

"I think [UTR] helped keep his dad presence in mind. I know that one of my husband's biggest fears was that our son wouldn't remember him when he came home cus he was so little, and I guess it helped there. The second my son saw him he went running to him, and I think it had a pretty big role in that. Otherwise I don't know if he would have responded like that honestly. There's only so many times you can show them pictures and talk about them. But having that recording and hearing the voice and playing it so often really helped that happen." -Spouse of Active Duty Army, Officer

Theme 2: Lowered Reintegration Difficulties Attributed to use of UTR

72%

Families felt that UTR helped their child recognize their military parent when they returned home.

Another theme that emerged from this research was about the process of reintegration. Although many participants commented that they worried their child would forget them or not recognize them, the connection that United Through Reading made between families and military members was why many families felt that they had an easier re-integration period after the deployment. This theme of easier reintegration periods is strongly related to connection; maintaining a strong connection with family during a deployment helped make re-integration periods easier. Through use of UTR, young children were more likely to recognize their military parent at homecoming, and because nearly every family used the video recordings as part of their bedtime routine, story time represented a place where the military member could seamlessly reintegrate – replacing the video recording with themselves.

The recordings also helped families where a child was born during the deployment. In these cases the recordings helped make the deployed parent less of a stranger when they returned home. Service members and spouses both seemed to expect that their newborns would take time before they were comfortable around the service member, however the recordings provided a way for newborns to become familiar with their father's voice, in such a way that even though they had never been physically touched by their military member, they were comfortable in their presence.

"[After my husband came home] you would have thought that they had been together the whole time. And that was I think partly due to the fact that we watched those videos all the time and so he knew [his dad's] voice he knew what [his dad] sounded like and was comfortable that [his dad] could just jump right in and do diapers and feedings and all that." -Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer

However, United Through Reading was not a perfect fix for every family. Some children still had difficulty reintegrating their parent into their lives:

"My son just would not go near him, would just stare at him like you are familiar, I recognize your face, but why are you not behind... the TV, like who are you? So it was difficult for like the first year." -Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer

In this case, the child quickly became comfortable being around his father, but the challenge was integrating his dad back into his life. This spouse said that he would only come to her if he needed something, so while he would sit next to and interact with his dad, he didn't see his dad as a caretaker. This challenge with the role of the deployed parent after their return was brought up by another participant in a different way:

"My son's first reaction the first night I was home, I had said hey buddy, let's go to bed. And he looks at me and looks at my wife and says: "Dad says that I have to go to bed" and my wife said, "Yeah, that's dad, go to bed, it's time to go to bed." And I think that was my son's realization that there's another authoritarian figure in the house [chuckles] and I kind of have to listen to him now sort of thing, instead of hey it's just fun dad that plays on the phone." -Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

Here the challenge was reintegrating the military parent into the role of a parent, rather than a "fun dad" that played with him over Facetime and read him stories at night. In both cases, the children had little trouble quickly recognizing and becoming comfortable with the presence of their military parent in the home, but the role of the service member as a caretaker was challenged. Despite these cases, all families reported having few challenges upon their military member's return. None of the children discussed in this study had substantial problems recognizing their parent - the fear that many military members shared.

Theme 3: UTR is not just for Children - The Impacts are Significant for Caregivers Too

Although United Through Reading is marketed as a program to help children stay connected to their military parent, spouses overwhelmingly commented that they experienced stress relief and a morale boost when they got to see the UTR recordings. Part of this was being able to see their spouse and reaffirm for themselves that they were doing okay. Many also talked about the impact on them to see their spouse's smile or hear their voice.

"It makes it a lot easier to feel like they're still part of the family and that's a big deal for us. It's easy to feel like a single parent when your service member is active duty and this makes it a lot less intense of a feeling, that you really get to have that connection – I love it. If he would just sit there and read me like books on tape I would be happy." -Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Officer

Many of the participants also talked about feeling like a single parent during military induced separations. For some, they would use the videos as a way for their children to "hang out with dad" for a little while, so that they could do other things. In this way, the videos served as a tangible way for military members to stay involved at home while they were away and while providing their spouses with support. Some took this a step further, working in parenting messages into their videos to address problems the non-deployed parent had discussed with them over other means of communication.

"I would try to leave some kind of little message because my wife would mention things like our son today, you know, was playing and he pushed one of his friends during soccer, and so it was kind of like, okay, let's try to parent from overseas. You know, try to get some kind of support for my wife and something that she could play over and over and would instill that in him, you know?" -Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

97%

Families reported having UTR recordings made their deployments or separations easier.

86%

Survey participants felt that UTR reduced caregiver stress

The idea of including messages of love or encouragement in addition to the story reading is encouraged by United Through Reading staff, however using these messages to "parent from overseas" as the first participant put it served as a means to both support the non-deployed parent and maintain an active parenting role in their children's lives during absences while supporting non-deployed spouses in parenting.

Theme 4: United Through Reading is a Morale Boost for Everyone

Every participant in the interviews said that United Through Reading improved their morale during the times they were separated due to military work. Many used terms such as "absolutely" and "100% yes" when answering whether they felt that the program had an impact on their morale. For one Army spouse, she said that United Through Reading was a bigger morale boost than anything else the military offered. She attributed this to the fact that her husband was part of the message. She related that the military can do very little to help the everyday family tensions and stress. Having her husband "home" via their recording was the next best thing to having him actually home.

Again, the theme of maintaining a connection between family members emerges as a central part of improving morale. In regards to children, several of the families talked about United Through Reading being a way for them to turn what could potentially be a very negative experience into a positive one. Families that used their recordings often could look back on their deployment with fonder memories.

One of the families in this research used United Through Reading through several deployments. They used the program as a way to boost their children's morale, even before their military member had left on deployment. United Through Reading gave them something to look forward to:

"As soon as we broke the news to the kids, I think it was that day of course they're all very sad because they knew it was going to be a long time, one of their first questions was can he do United Through Reading." -Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Enlisted

For military service members, their morale was improved by knowing that their family's morale was improved by the recordings. Service members acknowledged that their morale is impacted by their perception of how well their family is doing. If they know that their family is coping better because of the recordings, either through implicit assumption or through the explicit explanation by a spouse of how their video was received by their

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children, their morale is also improved. Several service members commented on the comfort, happiness, and subsequent morale boost they received from getting to watch their children's reactions to the videos, either through photos or video recording:

"Ah, I cried! It was amazing, um, yeah like a father that far away from a child for so many months at that point, it was just a mix of wanting to cry and wanting to laugh at her reaction all together." -Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

Being able to see children's reactions to something that they produced was a way for each of the service members to experience the same connection to their children that their families experienced by watching the book recordings. Although feelings ranged from "cute" or "awesome" to the physical reaction of crying at the video, each military member who was able to see video recordings or photos of their children engaging with the videos talked about how it was a positive experience for them, and one that they looked forward to.

Even for military members who did not get to see their children's reaction to their videos, the recordings gave them something to look forward to, as reading the stories gave them a break from their day to day routine.

"I definitely think it was encouraging, it was a lot of fun, it was definitely a stress reliever to be able to go sit in there, kindof, I'd read through the book. When you're deployed there's a lot of emotions that can go on, and so it was kindof, some of these books it's like alright, wipe the tears before I get in there and start reading." -Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

Service members are never really "off duty" during a deployment, although they may have down time. This is heightened further if they are deployed within a combat zone. However, creating a recording in one of United Through Reading's private rooms offered not only a break from the military work day, but also a secluded and safe space to express emotion, although they would "wipe the tears" before they started the recording. Participants who were making recordings at the Yellow Ribbon pre-deployment events expressed similar sentiments, and many related that they hoped they wouldn't cry (or that they did cry) during the process of recording.

Interestingly, the positive impact of morale on individual military members who participated in the program was also reported to have an impact on the morale of the larger military unit as a whole. When asked about the relationship between the morale of service members who used the program, and the morale of their unit one Marine explained the impacts of UTR on his morale and the morale of his own unit during a combat deployment.

100%

Every family who participated in this research indicated that United Through Reading improved their family's morale during times of separation.

In this, the impacts of United Through Reading are not only family-based. Having the recordings improves the morale of spouses and children because they feel that their military member is an active participant in their lives and can stay involved. When a service member's family experiences less stress and is doing "well" military members are less concerned about them, which in turn improves their own morale. Additionally, making video recordings gives military members something to look forward to, and being able to see their children's reactions improves their morale as well. When a soldier's morale is improved because they are less worried about their family, that in turn impacts their ability to relate to their unit in their downtime, which improves unit morale as a whole.

Further Reading: Unit Morale

"Especially for that first deployment which was the most dangerous and the hardest to get through, that was absolutely a huge benefit for my morale, and the morale of my wife and the morale of my son and the guys and girls that I was around: both the people who used it and the folks who uh, even the folks who didn't use it, yes. Even the folks who didn't use it, it actually impacted their morale too because of the guys with families, it made us all happier so [laughs] I think it was a boost for the entire unit... It probably kind of ebbs and flows in a unit, but when you're deployed into a hazardous area, you know there's a ton of stress and that kind of bubbles out when you have downtime. So when you're on a convoy, you're on a mission, you're on a patrol, you're 100% alert, you're looking around, you're paying attention, you don't have time to feel it emotionally. In the evening, or whenever you get back, it could be the daylight, whenever you get back to your patrol base or wherever you're going to spend the night and you decompress for a minute and dial a little bit down. You never really turn it all the way off, but you get ready to go to bed and you rest, that is when it really hits you, and that's also the time when you bond and you have a chance to talk about stuff, and usually you're talking about family, where you're from, you know, and so for guys with kids I mean that's obviously on your mind right then, and so the stress can kind of bubble over then, and you know, it makes it a lot more difficult to communicate with people because you're – part of it is because you're worried you're going to start crying in front of people you don't want to you know be weak in front of. Another part is the more you talk about it the more you're worried about it, and so I definitely think that helped. The ability to be able to know that my child was seeing me reading to them, not having immediate feedback but knowing that connection was there greatly reduced my stress and sense of being apart and so in the evenings when it's time to decompress and talk about it, it was way easier to talk about my family, way easier to try to get to know people, uh, easier to build relationships there because I didn't have so much on my mind about my family that I was worried about. And I know it wasn't only me who felt that way, there were a couple of the guys that we talked about that afterwards with the chaplain, about how it kind of helped our whole unit, and yeah, I really feel it was, it helped, really helped mission success and really helped the morale of the whole unit." -Active Duty Marine, Officer

100% *Military members reported the program improved their personal morale*

97% *Caregivers reported participating in the program improved their personal morale*

Theme 5: Recordings Overcome the Challenges and Constraints Associated with Other Forms of Communication

Technology has greatly increased the means by which military families can communicate. The families in this sample used a variety of communication strategies, including Facebook Messenger, Facetime, Skype, WhatsApp, Marco Polo, e-mail, handwritten letters, care packages, and phone calls. Some deployments had extremely limited communication, with military members only being able to connect to their loved ones every few months. This was particularly common in combat zones and on naval ships and submarines. In the case of the latter, service members often have very limited communication while their vessel is underway, and must wait until they are in port to make calls or use app-based services. They are often not able to tell their family in advance exactly when they are in port, so there is no guarantee that their family will be free.

However, most families were able to communicate with their military members often through weekly use of phone or app-based services and regular email communication. In the survey, families reported a wide range of communication strategies (Table 2).

Table 2. Communication Strategies

	Never	Daily	Weekly	Monthly
Mail (n = 56)	25%	1.8%	16.1%	57.1%
Instant Message (n = 57)	24.6%	42.1%	17.5%	15.8%
Email (n = 57)	8.8%	47.4%	36.8%	7.0%
Video Call (n = 57)	12.3%	15.8%	28.1%	43.9%
Phone Call (n = 58)	17.2%	19.0%	41.4%	22.4%

Despite these varied methods, many families discussed the challenges of communicating with these services. Several parents stated that the time zone differences made it difficult to find times where both the military member and the family were free. Additionally, younger children had a hard time understanding how to interact with a video call, and often didn't have the attention span for calls:

"[UTR] made me feel like it kept him connected a little bit more. Like I said [my son] didn't really understand Facetime and wasn't too interested in the live part of talking to Dad so much. But he stayed connected in keeping that family tradition going and just by hearing his voice. I think that helped a lot. Especially at that young age where they didn't really understand why they're gone." -Spouse of Active Duty Army, Officer

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Additionally, spouses said that the video chat services sometimes produced a blurry or grainy image, something they did not experience with the higher quality United Through Reading recordings.

"I was just really excited because I could see him clearly on the screen instead of you know that grainy fuzziness you get from a video chat." -Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer

Ultimately, United Through Reading also overcame the difficulties with both time zones and blackout dates - when service members couldn't use any form of communication - because families could use their recordings whenever their child asked for them and at times that were convenient for the families.

Theme 6: UTR Contributes to and Emphasizes a Love of Reading in Children

90% *Those surveyed reported that children's love of reading increased since receiving and watching the recordings*

Every participant in the interviews agreed that United Through Reading had an impact on their children's love of literature. Although some families talked about their children having a strong love of books before their use of the program, these families also believed that their use of UTR strengthened that love for their children.

"[United Through Reading] probably just continued to nurture their love of reading. They really love to be read to, both of them do, so having that as a way that they got to see [their father] while he was gone you know, probably helped nurture them a little bit, continue to make that a special time for them...my kids are lucky enough that they already love books and it really solidified that, so you know for kids who – a lot of kids don't have as much exposure, so I just think it's a great program for literacy." -Spouse of Active Duty Army, Enlisted

Families also reported experiences of United Through Reading improving their children's academics. For one family, they attribute their daughter's persistence to learn to read, despite dyslexia which makes reading challenging, to United Through Reading. Another family felt that the increased literacy skills gained through United Through reading helped their child in her education overall. In the surveys, it bears noting that using UTR recordings more than once a week was significantly associated with language and literacy skill improvement in children ($\chi^2(58) = 4.386, p < 0.05$.)

In addition to improving both academics and love of reading, United Through Reading also contributed to both an increased library for families, as well as exposure to authors they either hadn't heard of before or didn't think they would have heard of before. Because it was not uncommon for families to be introduced to authors or stories through United Through Reading, military members expressed a wide variety of reasons for why they

84%

Reported their children's language and literacy skills improving since watching their recordings

80%

Reported their children's overall academic development/performance improved after participating in the UTR program

picked the books they did. For some, it was that they or their children already had a fondness for a particular book, such as *Goodnight Moon* and books by Dr. Seuss. Others picked books that they felt their children would enjoy topically, mentioning that their daughter really liked princesses, or their son was into dinosaurs at that time. In some instances, spouses would send book suggestions to military members, asking for books that conveyed a specific message (e.g. a book that discussed bullying). At the Yellow Ribbon events, many families asked if UTR had any books relating to deployments or being away from family. At the pre-deployment yellow ribbon event in September in Dallas, UTR had two copies of *The Faraway Fox*. This book tells about a fox that is away from his family, but still thinks about them as he travels. Although there were several books that there were only one or two copies of, this was the one that ran out first, within the first 5 people who came to the table. Books that could be used to help give meaning to military induced separations, such as Dr. Seuss's *Oh, The Places You'll Go*, were mentioned often, indicating that military families value the role that books play in ascribing meaning to deployments.

For many families, the books they read with United Through Reading hold a special place in their family libraries. Participants commented on how their children still request that their military parent read the book they received through United Through Reading, sometimes years after their parent returned home.

"[My kids] know right where it is, it's in a special place in our house, on a special bookshelf, so whenever we're looking for books to read or we're in that room for whatever reason they'll [go] "oh dad there it is!" and go right back to that... We actually still have that book, it was a pretty powerful moment, so we have that book and I really, that was a really special time for us " -Active Duty Marine, Officer

The use of terms such as "Daddy's Stories" or "Daddy's Books" was a common theme through the interviews. Children would use these terms to reference both their physical book and their recording, and the use of these terms continued after their military parent returned home.

100%

Children, regardless of age, enjoyed watching the video recordings

100% *Children who were old enough to do so asked to watch their recordings*

Theme 7: Participation in United Through Reading Moderates Other Child Outcomes

Families were divided when it came to behavioral outcomes, however of the 48 families who answered this question on the survey, 87.5% agreed that their child(ren)'s behavior improved after participating in the program. Although the relationship between how often families watched their recordings and a reduction in behavior problems was not statistically significant ($p=0.54$), a Pearson's Chi Square test revealed that families who watched their videos at least once a week were more likely to report reduced child behavior problems than families who watched their videos less often. The lack of a statistically significant relationship could potentially be due to the small sample size, thus the relationship between video usage and child behavior outcomes warrants further investigation. Families were much more diverse in whether they felt that the United Through Reading program impacted their child(ren)'s interest in STEM topics. Here only 70.9% agreed, and 27 felt that the question didn't apply to their family. Finally, 94.6% of families felt that watching the recordings helped reduce separation related stress and anxiety for their child(ren).

The results of the child outcome measure as it was taken from the Blue Star Families Lifestyle Survey are presented in Table 4. This question was asked slightly differently than in the original survey in that families could choose the degree to which their child(ren) experienced each outcome: either moderately or to a greater extent. In the original survey, these two categories were combined. The majority of families (81%) reported that their child(ren) exhibited personal growth or resilience during the course of their military member's last deployment. Over two thirds (69%) indicated that their child(ren) had increased pride or confidence.

Table 4. Child Outcomes

	Did Not Experience	Experienced Moderately	Experienced to a Greater Extent
Personal Growth or Resilience	19.0%	60.3%	20.7%
Increased Pride or Confidence	31.0%	46.6%	22.4%
Separation anxiety, worry, sleep problems	17.2%	51.7%	31.0%
Behavior problems	27.6%	62.1%	10.3%
Reintegration challenges upon the service member's return	39.7%	50.0%	10.3%
Decreased academic performance (n=57)	78.9%	15.8%	5.3%
Depression (n=57)	70.2%	22.8%	7.0%

The other five outcomes are reported against the 2017 and 2018 Blue Star Family Lifestyle Survey findings for the national sample in Table 5. Although the United Through Reading sample scored higher than the national sample on every measure, it is important to note two potential reasons for this. The first is the small sample size of only 58 families. The

Table 5. UTR Child Outcomes Compared to National Sample

	2017	2018	UTR
Separation anxiety, worry, sleep problems	54%	57%	82.7%
Behavior problems	49%	53%	72.4%
Reintegration challenges upon the service member's return	28%	30%	60.3%
Decreased academic performance	18%	18%	21.1%
Depression	13%	16%	29.8%

Blue Star Lifestyle Survey samples the entire active duty, reserve, and veteran population, which could potentially moderate their outcomes. The second is the high likelihood that United Through Reading experiences a sampling bias among their participants. Families who are more vulnerable to the effects of military induced separations may be more likely to participate in United Through Reading than families who are at a lower risk for negative child outcomes.

This bias is supported by the high levels of agreement with the moderating effects of United Through Reading by participants in this study. Although 72% of families reported that their child(ren) experienced behavior problems to a moderate or greater extent, 87.5% felt that their children's behavior was improved after participating in the program. This is understandable too, considering that only 10.3% of the families felt that their children experienced behavior problems "to a greater extent", as 62.1% of these responses only experienced behavior problems "moderately". Because the Blue Star Families data was not broken up this way, it is not possible to determine whether their sample experienced a similar skew towards moderate outcomes. Similarly, although 60.3% of families expressed reintegration challenges upon their service member's return, the qualitative data clearly supports the assertion that United Through Reading helped make reintegration easier for families. Although 82.7% of families reported their child(ren) experiencing separation anxiety, worry, or sleep problems, 94.6% of families felt that UTR reduced stress and anxiety in their child(ren).

In light of this, it is incredibly important to not interpret these findings as indicative that United Through Reading is not serving as a buffer between families and negative child outcomes, but instead understand that the families who do utilize the program potentially experience these outcomes at a higher rate. This question did not evaluate the relationship between UTR and child outcomes, but rather their existence. It is my suggestion, then, that these statistics should be understood as a baseline for UTR's participants rather than an evaluation of UTR's impacts.

Theme 8: Spread of Knowledge

Families who use United Through Reading often talk about their experiences to other military families, encouraging them to also participate in the program. When doing so, the majority of individuals do not talk about the mechanics of the program, such as choosing books or the physical making of recordings. Families tend to describe the program in terms of the impacts that it has had on them. For a few of the service members who participated

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in the interviews, this type of beneficiary driven knowledge spread was the reason why they chose to participate in the program. Examples of how families talk about the program to others are shown below:

“I would tell them that it’s an amazing program, you know, that really strengthens the family bond. There’s so many good effects from this program that I don’t think you really recognize or realize until afterwards. And the impact is lifelong, I mean, there’s no way to gauge the impact I think, because everyone’s different but for me there was multiple: How it strengthened the family bond, it was an encouragement every day, it established a relationship between a father and a son that didn’t exist at the time of the deployment. And so it is life changing and you know family is so important. That support from home is so important, but when they’re able to communicate back through this program because this program offers it, you know, then the family also feels supported by the military I think, you know, that the military cares and the service member cares, so it’s just, it makes it so that it’s a two way street of support.” –Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer

“United Through Reading is a way to keep your service member and their child connected through another avenue. Cus you can tell them all day long, Daddy called, he’s on the phone, he said he loved you. That’s wonderful but you don’t get that direct connection between your child and their service member, that communication, that almost eye contact even though you’re a video, you know. It makes it a lot easier to feel like they’re still part of the family and that’s a big deal for us. It’s easy to feel like a single parent when your service member is active duty and this makes it a lot less intense of a feeling, that you really get to have that connection – I love it. “ –Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Officer

In both of these examples the participants emphasized the benefits that United Through Reading had on their lives: increased connection, strengthening family bonds, feeling like their military member is still part of their routine, establishing relationships between parent and child, overcoming the challenges of other forms of communication, and the encouragement it gives them. This style of explaining the program through its impacts emerged repeatedly throughout this research. Additionally, in the survey when provided the space to write additional comments or suggestions, every participant who answered chose to reflect on the impacts that the program had on their families.

100%

Families reported that they were extremely likely to recommend UTR to another military family

98%

Families reported that they were extremely satisfied with their UTR experience

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When asked in an open-ended question in the survey where they heard about United Through Reading, service members and caregivers differed widely in their answers. Military members most often cited their Chaplain, the USO, or the MWR, though one person answered 'friends', one said 'command' and two heard about it during their deployment. Caregivers also heard about UTR through the USO, their Chaplain, command, and friends, but also cited family, social media, pre-deployment briefings, and military support resources such as Fleet and Family, FRGs (and other spouse's clubs), and Yellow Ribbon events.

Theme 9: Retention and Re-enlistment

When asked about the relation between use of United Through Reading and a military member's continued service, servicemen unanimously agreed that they viewed their service in a different category than United Through Reading. Military members agreed that although United Through Reading didn't contribute to their desire to stay in the military, the program was a valued service that they wanted to see continue.

"I think they're just two different categories and I don't think that they directly interact with each other, so I would say no, I loved the experience and like I said I would probably use again if I deployed again, but I don't see how that would affect my decision to stay or leave the military." -Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

In the surveys, families were more divided on this topic. 57.8% of military members felt that they had an increased willingness to continue their military service after participating in United Through Reading, while only 37.1% of caregivers felt this way. Although in each case more participants agreed that UTR had an impact on retention/re-enlistment than those who disagreed, it is important to note the high percentages (34.8% and 28.6%) of participants who felt that the question was not applicable to them. This may be because, like service members reported in interviews, military families feel that United Through Reading is in a different category/unrelated to their willingness to continue their service.

Although United Through Reading may not have a direct impact on the continued service of military members or their families, the program may have a more abstract impact, by helping service members stay connected to their families.

"I think that participating in UTR, gave me another opportunity to connect to my children while I was deployed. And I think that one of the primary reasons why people leave or get out of the military is because of the big gaps that they have in their family lives when you deploy. So I think that in the same way that UTR has increased morale, I think it does that because it allows you to maintain those connections to the people that you care about back home. So I do think that there would be an effect in improving military retention by mitigating the biggest drawback of deployment. I mean there are other bigger drawbacks to deployment, but socially that's a fairly big one." -Active Duty Air Force, Enlisted

The Benefits of United Through Reading

The survey asked participants to select all of the benefits that they saw through United Through Reading (Table 6). Family resiliency emerged as the top reported benefit by families, followed by strengthened family bonds during separation. Child outcomes such as increased literacy skills and reduction in problematic behaviors emerged as the least mentioned benefits, however this again may be due to the lower age range of children in this study. Families who used their video at least once a week were more likely to report that keeping their military member as part of their family routine was a benefit of UTR ($\chi^2(58) = 8.572, p < 0.01$). This supports the qualitative data and indicates that what families see as the biggest benefits of the program are family level outcomes, such as increased connection, family bonds, readiness, and keeping the military member involved and remembered. This makes sense, considering these are the benefits that families most often used when they talked about the program to others.

Table 6. Benefits of UTR

	N	%
Family resiliency	56	96.6
Strengthened family bonds during separation	54	93.1
Increased family connectedness	51	87.9
Keeping the military member as part of our family routine	48	82.8
Helping my child(ren) recognize my military member	42	72.4
Family readiness	40	69.0
Increased desire to read	31	53.4
Personal readiness	29	50.0
> Military Member	16	69.9*
> Caregiver	13	37.1*
Increased literacy skills	26	44.8
Reduction in problematic behaviors	23	39.7

*Statistically significant difference at the .05 level

There was a significant difference between how military members and caregivers felt UTR impacted their personal readiness ($\chi^2(58) = 5.836, p < 0.05$). Military members were more likely to say that their personal readiness was a benefit of United Through Reading than caregivers were. This is the only outcome that military members and caregivers differed significantly on.

Beyond the relationships that were already mentioned, how often families watched their videos was not related to any family or child level outcomes. The number of recordings families received, or how many deployments their military member had engaged in, similarly didn't impact any of the family or child level outcomes. This indicates that the benefits of United Through Reading are not dependent upon families receiving a certain number of recordings, and that the benefits don't decrease with cumulative deployments. Similarly, for the most part (with language and literacy skill improvement being the exception) the number of times a family is able to watch their video does not increase or decrease the benefits they get from the program.

Suggestions

Families who participated in the interview phase of this research had two main suggestions for United Through Reading moving forward: 1) provide more books for more advanced readers and 2) get the word out to more people. In this first point, several families commented that either they, or another family they knew, either had older children when they began using the program, or had used the program for so long that their children had grown older. As one spouse put it:

"I can tell you the only thing that we have thought of that might help improve [UTR] a little bit is like [my children], as they're getting older they still want to take part in it but you know a lot of the books are story books or picture books, so they have said it'd be really great if they would have like maybe some chapter books or something a little bit older. [My husband] went around that and he went and got his own [books]. I know that [my son] had mentioned that before, he loves the books he got, but he was just like it would be neat if I could read like a chapter of this or whatever." -Spouse of Active Duty Navy, Enlisted

She went on to explain that because some children might be reading at an advanced level at younger ages, a wider book selection would cater to their current reading level.

"Just look at my 4 kids and their different levels at their different ages, you know, [my son] was pretty advanced in his reading, so at our youngest's age right (Age 9) now he would have already been reading big chapter books, you know. I think it would just be good to have a little bit of selection."

Families, particularly those who use the physical recordings sites, may benefit from a wider selection of books for different reading levels. This would cater both to families with older children and to families with younger children reading at more advanced levels. One of the service members who served as a volunteer for United Through Reading at his USO while deployed suggested having a list of recommended books on site for different age levels and interests, as well as lists of other books from available authors. This may be particularly useful to families utilizing the app, but also to families who choose to purchase their own books for recordings.

"I think definitely something that I could encourage United Through Reading would be maybe come up with a list of books for these ages. You might not have them available but you can say if your kid likes these types of books these are an age group appropriate and also by genre. So you might have say for example, and that was something that I was able to do and kind of tell people if you like these books, you'll definitely like this one, or if you like this author I would suggest some of his other books." -Army National Guardsman, enlisted

Although one of the more difficult suggestions to implement, 7 of the families (the most for any one suggestion) talked about the need to get the word about United Through Reading to more people. A Navy spouse said, *"I guess, it's shocking to me how many people don't know about it...I dunno, in the military it's so hard, there's so many different benefits, and you think that everybody knows about them and they don't."* Participants had suggested several different avenues for further advertising:

- Focusing on trying to reach the spouses
 - "I think the spouses are the ones who actually take care of a lot of the things that happen on the home front, um, especially during the deployment with children. So the word that you get out more to the spouses, I think that would be beneficial."* Naval Spouse, Active Duty, Officer
- Coordinate with the calendar of deploying active duty units and integrate into the pre-deployment meetings
 - "There are a lot of standard pre-deployment activities. Everybody has to get their shots, everybody has to get their gear, everybody has to have their training, I would just see if they could talk to some of the commanders and say could we insert this just as a 90 second infomercial if you will for United Through Reading, just to say, hey, while you're doing this, you know, um, shots at the lab or getting your gear or whatever, we're going to have a little site set up and do this."* Active Duty Army, Officer
- Family Readiness Groups

With these strategies, participants recognized that the high turnover rate in the military on installations or deployments creates an uphill battle. Due to the positionality of United Through Reading, access to different channels, such as the MWR, USO, or "command", may be restricted or dependent upon networking. However these suggestions were included as an insight into where military families reported receiving their information from. Because the families who participated in this research reported actively advocating the program to other military families, using the existing network of United Through Reading beneficiaries to gain access to various FRGs, Facebook groups, and pre-deployment meetings may be an effective path. Additionally, information about United Through Reading should mirror the way that military families talk about the program, emphasizing the outcomes of family connection, morale improvement, and other benefits of the program. Many of the families in this study expressed that reading was already an important part of their lives when they chose to participate in the program. This suggests that United Through Reading beneficiaries may be biased towards those that already see the value of reading to their children. Marketing UTR (in addition to the ways the program is already doing) as a critical family resiliency tool may appeal to more diverse audiences.

With the exception of the suggestions above, the United Through Reading App, which was released at the same time this research began, was seen by many as the solution to things they would have changed about the program, and in interviews and during participant observation the app received high praise and positive feedback. Several of the interviewees had not heard about the app before, so the interview served as a way to get their initial thoughts about its uses. One of the service members was so excited by the prospect that

he downloaded the app while we were talking. Families felt that the app made United Through Reading more accessible to families who were not currently experiencing a deployment, and several noted that this service would make it easier for them to use United Through Reading for other forms of military induced separations. For families who experience these types of separations often, participants in the interviews seemed excited for the prospect to record new stories and add to recordings they had been using from their loved one's last deployment.

Additionally, families saw the app as providing them a new way to "close the circle" of communication with their service member by having their children make recordings of them reading to send back to their military parent. For older children, this could take the form of the child reading a chapter and then their parent reading a chapter. For younger kids, the process may encourage them to practice reading. One mother at a Yellow Ribbon event pointed out that her children are required to read a certain number of minutes every night for school, and that reading a story to their father would be a way to make this assignment more interesting. Drawing on the themes that emerged from the research, this would also serve as a way of keeping the military parent involved in the homework routine.

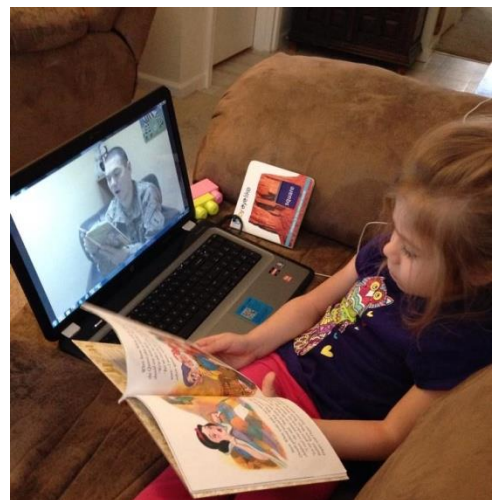
Service members didn't see the app as a replacement for more permanent recording stations, particularly those overseas and on Navy ships, as some were concerned about their internet connection while in these situations. However, the app was still seen as a positive supplement to these recording stations that they intended to use moving forward.

Conclusion

This research sought to address four main questions: 1) In what ways does participation in UTR impact a child's love of reading? 2) What are the impacts of participation in UTR on child behavior during and after military-related family separation? 3) What are the impacts of participation in UTR on morale and stress levels for military members and caregivers? And 4) How does participation in UTR impact military members' retention or re-enlistment in the military?

Impacts on Love of Reading

Participation in United Through Reading facilitates a love of reading in children. In families where reading is already emphasized and children are already avid readers, United Through Reading helps to emphasize and continue that love. For many families, this is because of the connection that United Through Reading creates between families and their service member. The recordings become something special and represent a special time for children to spend with their service member, which helps frame reading as special. Furthermore, although many of the children in the survey had not started reading yet, in families where children were older parents agreed that United Through Reading helped improve language and literacy skills.



Impacts on Child Behavior

Although some families agreed that United Through Reading contributed to a reduction in problematic behavior in their children, this was the least cited benefit by survey respondents. This may be because of the younger age range of the children in the families that participated in the survey. It may also be because the causes of the behavior problems that are experienced by military youth before, during, and after a deployment are complex and interrelated, consisting of military culture, age, number of deployments experienced previously, family resiliency and readiness, and personal resiliency to name a few. That 87.5% of the families surveyed, after controlling for those who felt the question didn't apply, felt that their children's behavior improved after receiving and watching their recordings indicates that United Through Reading does contribute to a reduction in child behavior problems in participating families.

Impacts on Morale and Stress of Caregivers and Service Members

United Through Reading improved morale for every member of the family - children, caregivers, and service members - by helping them feel more connected to each other. For caregivers, watching the videos and being able to see their service member helped reassure them that they were safe, provided enjoyment, and in some cases provided much needed time to either relax or let the children "listen to dad" while the caregiver did other household chores. For service members, morale and stress reduction was achieved through two different avenues. The first is direct: making the recordings and/or watching their children's reactions to the recordings gave them something to look forward to and provided them with a brief escape from their day to day duties. The second is indirect: knowing that their family was supported through their use of the recordings reduced military member stress, improved morale, and improved readiness because they were less worried about their family back home.

Impacts on Retention and Re-enlistment

Service members in the interviews were unanimous in their feelings that United Through Reading, although a benefit that they would use again and recognize the benefits of, does not directly impact their desire to continue their military service. This is because service members view the United Through Reading program in a different category than their motivations for serving in the military. Survey responses reflect this and show similar results for caregivers. However, because United Through Reading reduces stress, reduces child behavior problems, supports spouses, and improves morale, and because family stress is one of the main reasons that military families choose to leave the service, it is a probability that United Through Reading contributes to retention and re-enlistment in an indirect way.

It is clear from this research that the families who use and participate in United Through Reading feel that it is a critical family resiliency tool for their "toolbox", as several families called it. Every participant lauded the program for the impacts that it had on their family and themselves. Additionally, families in both the survey and the interviews discussed at length the impacts that United Through Reading had on making reintegration easier, particularly in families with young children. Although participants suggested improving the

book selection for more advanced readers and providing a means for more families to hear about the program, participants unanimously felt that United Through Reading was a benefit to their families and something that they would use again in the future.

"I would just like to say thank you, you know, I really appreciate the work you guys do. It's something very small but something that makes, like all the difference to us when we're deployed because that's that one, sometimes that's that one moment of the day that, you know, that's just fun in that little room for like five minutes. I felt like I wasn't in the desert, you know, far away from my child. It was like a little universe separated from that environment which sometimes can be very stressful, so yeah, thank you very much, that really helped me, and I totally know that that helped my daughter too." - Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

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Appendix: Survey Descriptive Statistics

Communication Strategies

	Never	Daily	Weekly	Monthly
Mail (n = 56)	14 (25%)	1 (1.8%)	9 (16.1%)	32 (57.1%)
Instant Message (n = 57)	14 (24.6%)	24 (42.1%)	10 (17.5%)	9 (15.8%)
Email (n = 57)	5 (8.8%)	27 (47.4%)	21 (36.8%)	4 (7.0%)
Video Call (n = 57)	7 (12.3%)	9 (15.8%)	16 (28.1%)	25 (43.9%)
Phone Call (n = 58)	10 (17.2%)	11 (19.0%)	24 (41.4%)	13 (22.4%)

How often did you/your family use the recording(s)?

	N	%
More than once a day	8	13.8
Once a day	13	22.4
A few times a week	19	32.8
A few times a month	10	17.2
A few times during the deployment	8	13.8

When did you/your family use the recording(s)?

	N	%
During deployments	57	98.3
During separations due to training	29	50.0
During TDY separations	25	43.1
For irregular work hours	17	29.3
Geobatching	13	22.4
While the military member is home	8	13.8

Where were the recordings made?

	N	%
A UTR Command Site	35	61.4%
An Installation Site (base Library, Family Support Center)	13	22.8%
Self Service using the UTR App	4	7.0%
At an Event	2	3.5%
A Permanent Site (USO, Airport, etc.)	2	3.5%
Mobile Story Station	1	1.8%

Maintaining a Living Relationship

Indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

Child Outcomes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
My child(ren) enjoy watching their recording(s)	53 (91.4%)	5 (8.6%)	-	-	-
My child(ren) ask to watch their recording(s)	41 (70.7%)	13 (22.4%)	-	-	4 (6.9%)
My child(ren)'s love of reading as increased since participating in the United Through Reading program	22 (37.9%)	25 (43.1%)	5 (8.6%)	-	6 (10.3%)
My child(ren)'s language and literacy skills improved after receiving and watching the recordings	16 (27.6%)	24 (41.4%)	7 (21.1%)	-	11 (19.0%)
My child(ren)'s behavior improved after receiving and watching the recordings	22 (37.9%)	20 (34.5%)	5 (8.6%)	1 (1.7%)	10 (17.2%)
My child(ren) have conveyed an increased interest in topics such as science and math after receiving and watching the recordings	9 (15.5%)	13 (22.4%)	7 (12.1%)	2 (3.4%)	27 (46.6%)
My child(ren)'s overall academic development/performance improved after receiving and watching the recordings	10 (17.2%)	14 (24.1%)	6 (10.3%)	-	28 (48.3%)
Watching the recordings has reduced separation-related stress/anxiety for my child(ren)	35 (60.3%)	18 (31.0%)	1 (1.7%)	2 (3.4%)	2 (3.4%)
Family Level Outcomes					
Having the United Through Reading recordings has improved my family's morale during military induced separations	46 (79.3%)	11 (19.0%)	-	-	1 (1.7%)
Having/making the recordings makes deployments/separations easier	43 (74.1%)	13 (22.4%)	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)	-
Caregiver stress was reduced by using the UTR recordings	24 (41.4%)	19 (32.8%)	5 (8.6%)	2 (3.4%)	8 (13.8%)
Military member stress was reduced by making UTR recordings	22 (37.9%)	26 (44.8%)	2 (3.4%)	1 (1.7%)	7 (12.1%)
Utilizing the United Through Reading recordings makes my family feel more connected during periods of separation	45 (77.6%)	10 (17.2%)	1 (1.7%)	-	2 (3.4%)
United Through Reading is a critical readiness and resiliency tool	46 (79.3%)	11 (19.0%)	-	-	1 (1.7%)

Maintaining a Living Relationship

Morale for Military Members and Caregivers

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
Military Member: Improved morale through UTR (n=23)	19 (82.6%)	2 (8.7%)	-	-	2 (8.7%)
Caregiver: Improved morale through UTR (n=35)	26 (74.3%)	8 (22.9%)	1 (2.9%)	-	

Impacts on Retention/Re-Enlistment

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
Military Member: Increased willingness to re-enlistment/continue my military service	9 (39.1%)	2 (8.7%)	3 (13.0%)	1 (4.3%)	8 (34.8%)
Caregiver: Increased willingness to support military member's re-enlistment/continued military service	6 (17.1%)	7 (20.0%)	11 (31.4%)	1 (2.9%)	10 (28.6%)

Please indicate whether your child(ren) experienced the following moderately or to a greater extent:

	Did Not Experience	Experienced Moderately	Experienced to a Greater Extent
Personal Growth or Resilience	11 (19.0%)	35 (60.3%)	12 (20.7%)
Increased Pride or Confidence	18 (31.0%)	27 (46.6%)	13 (22.4%)
Separation anxiety, worry, sleep problems	10 (17.2%)	30 (51.7%)	18 (31.0%)
Behavior problems	16 (27.6%)	36 (62.1%)	6 (10.3%)
Reintegration challenges upon the service member's return	23 (39.7%)	29 (50.0%)	6 (10.3%)
Decreased academic performance (n=57)	45 (78.9%)	9 (15.8%)	3 (5.3%)
Depression (n=57)	40 (70.2%)	13 (22.8%)	4 (7.0%)

APPENDIX F
CLIENT DELIVERABLE – SLIDE DECK



United Through Reading

Master's Thesis Report

Erica M Hawvermale | November 2019

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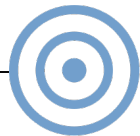
Project Overview



OBJECTIVES & GOALS

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

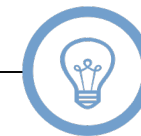
Understand the impacts that United Through Reading (UTR) has on service members, caregivers, and children



KEY QUESTIONS

In what ways does participation in UTR impact:

- A child's love of reading?
- A child's behavior during and after military-induced family separation?
- The morale and stress levels for military members and caregivers?
- A service member's retention or re-enlistment in the military?



METHODOLOGY



Participant Observation

At 2 Army National Guard & 1 Army Reserve Yellow Ribbon events



Interviews

With 10 service member and 9 caregiver beneficiaries via webcam or phone



Survey

Of 23 service member and 35 caregiver beneficiaries, computer based

PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN

	Interviews	Surveys
Total	19	58
Caregiver	9	35
Service Member	10	23
Gender		
Male	9	15
Female	10	43
Activity Status		
Active Duty	14	54
Reserve	2	2
National Guard	3	2

	Interviews	Surveys
Service Branch		
Army	10	24
Air Force	2	3
Navy	6	20
Marines	1	11
Rank		
Enlisted	8	10
NCO	0	3
Warrant Officer	1	1
Officer	10	44

Executive Summary

Connection drives other outcomes

The facilitation of a sense of connection between military members and their families emerged as a predominant factor in every other theme.



Impacts on Love of Reading

United Through Reading facilitates a love of reading in children by making reading something special that they can share with their service member while they are gone. Furthermore, families report UTR having an impact on literacy and language skills.



Impacts on Child Behavior

Many families reported that their children's behavior improved after receiving and watching the recordings. The recordings also helped to reduce stress and anxiety in children



Caregiver & Service Member Outcomes

Participation in this program reduces stress and improves morale for both service members and caregivers. The recordings give service members something to look forward to and help caregivers feel supported and encouraged.



Retention & Re-Enlistment

While service members see United Through Reading in a different category as their continued service, UTR may have an indirect impact on retention by improving family level outcomes



Detailed Findings

Theme 1

Connection

UTR facilitates connection between military members and their families

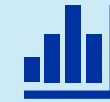


Interviews

Still Present– Service members reported that the video recordings helped them feel like they were still involved at home, even when they weren't physically there.

Routine– Families often used their videos at night, keeping their military member part of the bedtime routine, and use of UTR helped create routines for future deployments.

Meeting Newborns– For families who welcomed a new baby while their service member was away, UTR helped to develop a relationship between the two before the service member came home



Survey

69% of families surveyed used their UTR recordings more than once a week



What Beneficiaries Say

You know that time when you have with your kids at the end of the day, and it's just you and them and you're usually laying in bed and you're reading to them, ...it was really special to be able to do that **even though I was deployed exactly halfway around the world from where my kids were. United Through Reading brought us back together instantly through reading that book together on the video.**

187 -Active Duty Marine, Officer

I think it's a great way to maintain that living relationship with your children. I think that's one of the difficult things about deployments is the parent that's away is - you worry that you're becoming forgotten, that you're missing parts of your children's lives. And by using the United Through Reading videos... in their eyes you're still sort of a participant in their lives. Even though you the parent are not physically there, it's almost like they think you're there.

-Active Duty Army, Officer

Theme 2

Reintegration

Easier reintegration was attributed to using UTR recordings.



Interviews

Out of Sight, Out of Mind– A worry for many service members was that their child would forget them while they were gone

Familiarity– The recordings provided a way for young children to remain - or become - familiar with the service member's face and voice

Routine– For families who used their recordings nightly, bedtime stories were a place where the service member could transition smoothly back into the family routine



Survey

72% of families felt that UTR helped their child recognize their service member when they returned home



What Beneficiaries Say

Definitely the recordings made it where it wasn't such a hard transition stepping back into his life or my son's life, because they kind of felt like they still had that connection the whole time I was gone.

-Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

It was kindof funny when I met my newborn for the first time... because I picked him up and he was just smiley and just like giddy and kind of nuzzling into me. [My wife] said I think it was honestly because of the recordings, and because of video chatting that he got to hear my voice.

-Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

Theme 3

Caregiver Impacts

UTR is not just for children! The benefits were significant for caregivers too.

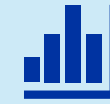


Interviews

Watching Brings Comfort– Spouses found comfort in being able to see and hear their military member

Caregiver Support– Spouses used the recordings to either take a breather, or let the kids “hang with dad” while they completed other necessary tasks

Parenting from Overseas– Some fathers used the recordings to include lessons for their children, such as avoiding bullying



Survey

97% of families reported that having UTR recordings made their deployments or separations easier

86% of survey participants felt that UTR reduced caregiver stress



What Beneficiaries Say

If my wife was putting them down to bed and needed a little bit of time to you know, heaven forbid do the dishes or take a shower or something like that, **she could set them up with this video of dad reading to them as a bedtime story, so that would give her 10 or 15 minutes to catch up on activities of daily living.**

-Active Duty Army, Officer

They helped me know, hey he’s okay. And he’s safe, and he is just reading a book. Now they kindof make me feel like I get a little bit of a break, **even if they are only about 5 minutes long, it’s time where I can sort of sit back and watch the boys just enjoy being with dad** for a second and again it also makes me know hey, he’s safe.

-Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer

Theme 4

Morale

United Through Reading helped improve morale for service members, caregivers, and children.



Interviews

Connection is Central– The theme of maintaining connection emerged as a central part of improving morale for families

Something to Look Forward To– Service members looked forward to the opportunity to read, and to see their children’s reactions

Extended Impact– UTR has the potential to improve Unit-level morale by improving individual service member morale and readiness



Survey

100% of families who participated in this research indicated that UTR improved their family’s morale

100% of service members reported the program improved their personal morale

97% of caregivers reported the program improved their personal morale



What Beneficiaries Say

Even though he wasn’t recording a new story and it was the same story, to see it again and again, like throughout the day or every night was kindof like that reminder that he’s here for us, that encouragement like, cus, **on it he also said, you know, 'can't wait to see you soon,' you know, 'I'm working hard but I'm coming home,' and those words of encouragement I think helped to sustain that love and that unity for the family during that time.**

-Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer

I think the family is integral to my personal morale. And if they’re well and they’re stable and not demonstrating high signs of stress then my stress is definitely impacted for the better, and I can handle a lot better stressors at work if there are less stressors in the home.

-Active Duty Air Force, Officer

You're away and you're kindof worrying, are the kids missing you? So **just knowing that they have that tool to be able to utilize definitely makes you feel better.**

-Army Reservist, Officer

Theme 5

Communication

UTR recordings overcame the challenges and constraints associated with other forms of communication.



Interviews

Clear Picture– UTR video recordings presented a clear, non-grainy image that both children and caregivers could appreciate over the choppiness of video chats

Child Requests– UTR recordings could be played at the request of the child – morning, day, or night – independently of the service member’s schedule, which was often opposite of the family

Interest and Etiquette– Families commented that young children and infants have a difficult time with both phone calls and video chats. The video recordings, however, could hold their interest and keep them engaged.



What Beneficiaries Say

[UTR] made me feel like it kept him connected a little bit more. Like I said **[my son] didn’t really understand Face Time and wasn’t too interested in the live part of talking to Dad so much. But he stayed connected in keeping that family tradition [of reading] going and just by hearing his voice.** I think that helped a lot. Especially at that young age where they didn’t really understand why they’re gone. I think that helps. -Spouse of Active Duty Army, Officer

I was just really excited because I could see him clearly on the screen instead of you know that grainy fuzziness you get from a video chat. -Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer

It’s an amazing opportunity to be able to connect with mom, dad, whoever, without having, like I said, the phone etiquette and the choppy video and all that sort of thing. It’s a good way for kids to just sit down, to be able to connect with dad without any distractions. Because it’s also short. It’s a story book, you know, or part of a chapter book. -Spouse of Active Duty Army, Warrant Officer

Theme 6

Love of Reading

United Through Reading contributes to and emphasizes a love of reading in children.

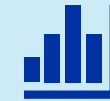


Interviews

“Daddy’s Stories”– Many families had a name like this for their recordings, and these became some of their children’s most requested books

Growing Library– United Through Reading helped expose families to new books and grow their at-home libraries

Beyond Reading– The love of reading UTR facilitated aided children in their academics



Survey

90% reported that children’s love of reading increased since receiving and watching the recordings

84% reported their children’s language and literacy skills improving since watching the recording

80% reported their children’s overall academic development/performance improved after participating in the UTR program



What Beneficiaries Say

He definitely loves reading more. I think that will be a lifelong thing. I would say that that would definitely be something that he’s developed: A love of reading, or at least a respect for books kind of thing. He can go to a book or he’ll pick out his favorite books and want to read them or share them or enjoys them at least a lot more.
-Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

Besides the, you know, the love for books, I would say it helped [my daughter] read better. She’s in that age where she’s learning how to read and it definitely helps her do better in school.
-Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

They would call them Daddy’s stories... the ones they want to hear the most at night is one of Daddy’s books.
-Spouse of Army National Guard, Enlisted

Theme 7

Other Child Outcomes

United Through Reading helps to moderate negative child outcomes such as stress and behavior problems.



Survey

86% families agreed that their children's behavior improved after participating in the program

95% of families felt that watching the recordings helped reduce separation related stress and anxiety for their children



What Beneficiaries Say

It's one of those things when they're really you know missing him, it just perks them up. When I see their faces, cus some - they could be crying, they could just be like shutting down kind of day - and I can be like "hey, come on," and we go in the living room and we'll put it in. **And even through some of the tears you'll kinda see that smile kinda crack, it's just - I can't explain it, it's like the switch for them. You know? And cases that sometimes dad can give them that, like the lift they need that I can't, even though he's not physically here.** So I mean, even if it's not so much like missing dad. Sometimes you know they just had a rough day at school or you know somebody said something that hurt their feelings or whatever, watching dad cut up kindof changes the mood.
-Spouse of Army Reservist, Enlisted

Theme 8

Spread of Knowledge

Beneficiary families talk about United Through Reading, and when they do they emphasize the impacts that it has.



Interviews

Impact Driven Communication– Service members and spouses both tended to emphasize benefits such as connection and routine when talking to other families or service members

User Driven Spread of Knowledge– Several service members related that although they had heard about UTR, they didn't make a recording until another service member, family, or their CO urged them to do so



Survey

100% of families reported that they were extremely likely to recommend UTR to another military family

98% of families reported that they were extremely satisfied with their UTR experience



What Beneficiaries Say

When I saw the looks on people's faces as they were telling me, 'I recorded this book for my children and now I'm back from my first deployment and now we all sit there and they'll watch me reading the books to my child with me sitting next to them in real time,' and I can see the looks on their face, so **just seeing that - this person's face light up and just see the change in their body posture and how they're getting really happy - I was like oh, you know what, maybe this is something I should look into.**

-Army Reservist, Enlisted

I would tell them that it's an amazing program, you know, that really strengthens the family bond. There's so many good effects from this program that I don't think you really recognize or realize until afterwards. **And the impact is lifelong, ...How it strengthened the family bond, it was an encouragement every day, it established a relationship between a father and a son that didn't exist at the time of the deployment.** And so it is life changing

-Spouse of Army Reservist, Officer

Theme 9

Retention & Re-enlistment

Participation in the UTR program did not have a direct impact on retention and re-enlistment, but may contribute indirectly.



Interviews

Different Categories– Service members felt that United Through Reading, though beneficial and something they would use again, was in a different category than their reasons for continuing their military service

Indirect contribution– Because of the impact that United Through Reading has on families, and due to the role that family wellbeing plays on retention and re-enlistment, it is likely that UTR plays an indirect role by acting as a buffer between families and negative outcomes



What Beneficiaries Say

I think they're just two different categories and I don't think that they directly interact with each other, so I would say no, I loved the experience and like I said I would probably use again if I deployed again, but I don't see how that would affect my decision to stay or leave the military.

-Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

I think that participating in UTR, gave me another opportunity to connect to my children while I was deployed. And I think that one of the primary reasons why people leave or get out of the military is because of the big gaps that they have in their family lives when you deploy. So I think that in the same way that UTR has increased morale, I think it does that because it allows you to maintain those connections to the people that you care about back home. **So I do think that there would be an effect in improving military retention by mitigating the biggest drawback of deployment.** I mean there are other bigger drawbacks to deployment, but socially that's a fairly big one!

-Active Duty Air Force, Enlisted

Benefits of United Through Reading

Family level benefits such as increased connection, resiliency, family bonding, and routine emerged as the top benefits of the program

	N	%
Family resiliency	56	97%
Strengthened family bonds during separation	54	93%
Increased family connectedness	51	88%
Keeping the military member as part of our family routine	48	83%
Helping my child(ren) recognize my military member	42	72%
Family readiness	40	69%
Increased desire to read	31	53%
Personal readiness	29	50%
> Military Member	16	70%
> Caregiver	13	37%
Increased literacy skills	26	45%
Reduction in problematic behaviors	23	40%

Suggestions & Conclusions



Suggestions

For many families, the new app provides solutions to much of the feedback they would have had; two suggestions still remain.



What Beneficiaries Say

United Through Reading needs to just continue to promote reading at all levels and being able to continue to highlight the benefits and the connections that reading brings. And it is something that I think that there continues to be – it's easier forgotten and it's just one of those habits that you quickly get out of practice, so **promoting reading even to older kids. There's been some older books and novels that I've been able to read to my kids that even in the teenage age that connection has been very valuable as well, not just to young kids.**

-Active Duty Air Force, Officer

More Advanced Books

- Provide a larger selection of books for advanced readers
- For some families, younger children read well above their grade level and would benefit from books that match their reading skill
- Some families have used United Through Reading through multiple separations, and their children have grown out of "children's" books
- Families commented that older children can benefit just as much from receiving United Through Reading recordings as young children

Spreading the Word

- Participants desired for more military families to know about the program. They suggested three main avenues for doing so:
 - Focus on reaching spouses
 - Coordinate with the calendar of deploying active duty units and integrate into their pre-deployment meetings
 - Family Readiness Groups and other spouse clubs
- Because the families who participated in this research reported actively advocating for United Through Reading to other military families, using the existing network of United Through Reading beneficiaries to gain access to FRGs, Facebook groups, and pre-deployment meetings may be an effective path



“ I would just like to say thank you, you know, I really appreciate the work you guys do. **It's something very small but something that makes, like all the difference to us when we're deployed** because that's that one, sometimes that's that one moment of the day that, you know, that's just fun in that little room for like five minutes.

I felt like I wasn't in the desert, you know, far away from my child.

*It was like a little universe separated from that environment which sometimes can be very stressful, so yeah, **thank you very much, that really helped me, and I totally know that that helped my daughter too.** ”*

- Army National Guardsman, Enlisted

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