

FEBRUARY 15, 2022

VIRTUAL EVENT

2021 BARBARA THOMPSON

EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH

ON MILITARY AND VETERAN FAMILIES AWARD



ABOUT THE AWARD

Established in 2015, the Military Family Research Institute's Excellence in Research on Military and Veteran Families Award is designed to bridge the gap between policy and practice. The goals of the award are to:

- » bring visibility to issues of military and veteran families generally, and to outstanding new research specifically;
- » increase the impact of rigorous scientific evidence on programs, policies and practices affecting military and veteran families;
- » strengthen connections between researchers and practitioners interested in military and veteran families; and
- » raise awareness of research about military and veteran families across many disciplines.

The winning paper is selected through a rigorous process. No nominations or applications are accepted, and authors have no idea their work is being considered. Instead, a panel of accomplished scholars examines every relevant article published during the eligible year. Multiple rounds of review include standardized quantitative assessments. In this way, the panel arrives at the final selection.

In 2019, MFRI named the Excellence in Research on Military and Family Veteran Award after Barbara Thompson, who has served military and veteran families for more than 30 years.

MFRI thanks Military REACH for supporting this award, and joining us in our mission to advance important research about and for military and veteran families.

ABOUT BARBARA THOMPSON

Barbara Thompson assumed the duties of director for the Office of Military Family Readiness Policy, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy in 2006 and retired in 2017. She was responsible for programs and policies that promote military families' well-being, readiness and quality of life. In this capacity, she had oversight for Department of Defense child development and youth programs, serving 700,000 children daily at more than 300 locations worldwide.



Thompson had purview over military family readiness programs, including spouse career advancement, military family life cycle and transition support, community capacity building supporting geographically dispersed military members and their families, the Family Advocacy Program, and Exceptional Family Member Program. She also coordinated support programs for the severely injured and supported the rebuilding of the Ministry of Education in Iraq.

Thompson is continuing her leadership in the military community by advising multiple national organizations, including MFRI.

LEAD ORGANIZATIONS

MILITARY FAMILY RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT PURDUE UNIVERSITY

The Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University conducts research on issues that affect military and veteran families and works to shape policies, programs and practices that improve their well-being.

Founded in 2000, MFRI envisions a diverse support community that understands the most pressing needs of military and veteran families. To achieve this, MFRI collaborates with researchers and practitioners to create meaningful solutions for them.

This internationally-recognized organization is located at Purdue University's College of Health and Human Sciences in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.



MILITARY REACH

The purpose of Military REACH, a partnership between Auburn University and the DoD-USDA Partnership for Military Families, is to bridge the gap between military family research and practice. To facilitate



the DoD's provision of high-quality support to military families, its objective is to make research practical and accessible. The center does this by producing research summaries with action-oriented implications for their target audiences: families, helping professionals, and those who work on behalf of military families.

Military REACH team members critically evaluate and synthesize military family research related to issues of family support, resilience and readiness. They identify meaningful trends and practical applications of that research, and then deliver research summaries and action-oriented implications to their target audiences.



2021 AWARD WINNER

Zhang, N., Hoch, J., & Gewirtz, A. H. (2020). **The physiological regulation of emotion during social interactions: Vagal flexibility moderates the effects of a military parenting intervention on father involvement in a randomized trial.** *Prevention Science, 21*, 691-701. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-020-01122-6>.

STUDY TAKEAWAYS

» The vagus nerve connects to the heart and helps regulate the muscles of the face, neck, and head. Cardiac vagal tone – a measure of heart rate variability – underlies social engagement behaviors and can be considered an index of physiological emotion regulation. Emerging research suggests that cardiac vagal tone may be related to parenting behaviors.

» The After Deployment Adaptive Parenting Tools (ADAPT) program was designed to strengthen effective parenting behaviors and to prevent children's mental health problems in military families. It teaches many aspects of effective parenting behaviors such as problem solving, monitoring, discipline, skill encouragement, positive involvement and emotion socialization.

» Although on average military fathers did not show significant improvements in parenting if they were randomized into the ADAPT program (vs. service as usual), our study showed evidence that the ADAPT program was more effective in strengthening fathers' parenting if fathers had higher levels of physiological emotion regulation capacities. This suggests that physiological emotion regulation may be a biomarker that predicts how effective the ADAPT program would be for military fathers. Such findings can provide a future opportunity to tailor the intervention to best meet fathers' different needs.



BIOGRAPHIES

NA ZHANG

Na Zhang is an assistant professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut. As a family scholar and prevention scientist, her program of research analyzes the intrapersonal and interpersonal pathways involved in the development of psychopathology and resilience among youth and adults who were exposed to stressful or traumatic experiences.

A major focus of her research is on the development and evaluation of behavioral parent training programs that consider parents as the agents of change. Zhang has investigated how effective parenting may lead to resilience outcomes in children from at-risk families. Her current program of research focuses on mindfulness training as an intervention strategy to strengthen and optimize parenting programs.

JOHN HOCH

John Hoch is a clinical psychologist and researcher at Fraser Child and Family Center in Minneapolis and at the University of Minnesota. His clinical work focuses on children with autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders. He is interested in the analysis of mobile psychophysiological data that is applicable to real-world clinical problems. Hoch's research seeks to garner results in deriving predictors of social determinants of health behaviors and trauma exposure from clinical data to allow for earlier identification and treatment. He hopes that clinical research will make the invisible visible and lead to better outcomes for clients.

ABIGAIL GEWIRTZ

Abigail Gewirtz is a Foundation Professor in the Department of Psychology at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on development, effectiveness testing and widespread implementation of targeted prevention programs that promote child resilience among highly stressed families, including those affected by military deployment and war.

Gewirtz's research has been funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Department of Defense. She is also the director of the Center for Resilient Families, tasked with the national implementation and dissemination of evidence-based parenting programs to families affected by traumatic stress.

She is the principal investigator on three randomized controlled trials to develop and test a web-enhanced parenting program for military parents returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

2021 FINALISTS

Hajal, N. J., Aralis, H. J., Kiff, C. J., Wasserman, M. M., Paley, B., Milburn, N. G., ... & Lester, P. (2020). **Parental wartime deployment and socioemotional adjustment in early childhood: The critical role of military parents' perceived threat during deployment.** *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 33*(3), 307-317. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22475>

STUDY TAKEAWAYS

» Fathers' levels of perceived threat during their military deployment (measured via retrospective self-report) was associated with 3- to 6-year-old children's externalizing behavior problems (measured via maternal report). Deployment perceived threat was a stronger and more consistent predictor of child adjustment than fathers' actual combat exposure, exposure to post-battle events, and depressive, anxiety and PTSD symptoms.

» The association between fathers' deployment perceived threat and children's behavioral problems was partially accounted for by fathers' reports of their sensitive parenting and parent-child interactions and mothers' reports of family emotional responsiveness. This suggests that the impact of fathers' deployment perceived threat on child adjustment operates at least partially through family processes related to emotion socialization. Thus, the present findings support the use of interventions that target emotional communication across the family system in prevention and treatment for military families, including those with young children.

» Researchers and clinicians working with military families should incorporate screening for parent perceived threat and chronic stress associated with deployment-related experiences (as well as lifetime traumatic events) into their assessment protocols. Parental trauma-related experiences should be integrated into case conceptualizations, treatment recommendations and interpretation of research findings regardless of whether parents screen positive for symptoms.

Lee, J. D., O'Neill, A. S., Denning, E. C., Mohr, C. D., & Hammer, L. B. (2020). **A dyadic examination of drinking behaviors within military-connected couples.** *Military Behavioral Health, 8*(4), 396-409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2020.1825241>

STUDY TAKEAWAYS

» This was one of the first studies to examine dyadic drinking within military-connected couples while providing insight into a few under-researched areas — namely, drinking behaviors among military spouses and veterans from nonclinical populations. Interestingly, relatively high rates of hazardous drinking (23%) were found among employed veterans who, on average, had been separated from the military for six years.

» Our study of matched military-connected couples reveals mutual influence in drinking behavior. Specifically, hazardous drinking symptoms of veterans and spouses was predictive of their partner's drinking frequency. However, hazardous drinking symptoms among veterans (but not spouses) were predictive of

higher drinking quantity on drinking days. In other words, spouses of hazardously drinking veterans may be at risk for higher frequency and quantity of consumption. Additionally, psychological distress was individually related to greater number of drinks and drinking more frequently through one's status as a hazardous drinker.

» Our findings call attention to the interdependent nature of drinking behaviors that occur between military-connected couples when symptoms of hazardous drinking are present, and place both members of the couple at longer-term risk for alcohol-related problems. Drinking intervention programs should consider the family unit when addressing hazardous alcohol use.

O'Neill, A. S., Mohr, C. D., Bodner, T. E., & Hammer, L. B. (2020). **Perceived partner responsiveness, pain, and sleep: A dyadic study of military-connected couples.** *Health Psychology, 39*(12), 1089-1099. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/hea0001035>

STUDY TAKEAWAYS

» Perceived partner responsiveness (PPR) is the perception that one is cared for, understood and validated by their partner. PPR is fostered by interactions in which increasingly personal and meaningful information is disclosed and responded to supportively. This dyadic daily diary study of veterans and their spouses suggests that having a responsive partner fosters analgesic and sleep-promoting effects through the social regulation of emotion. Specifically, PPR was positively associated with subsequent sleep quality for both members of the couple while PPR was negatively associated with subsequent pain for veterans only.

» Affect was found to be a mediating mechanism by which PPR is associated with pain (for veterans) and sleep quality (for both veterans and their spouses).

This is consistent with the larger body of literature that suggests that the social regulation of emotion is a powerful way by which close relationships influence health (Farrell et al., 2018). This study builds upon this literature by testing the full mediational path linking social relationships to health through affect, which few studies have examined.

» These findings suggest that harnessing the health-promoting benefits of responsive social relationships could be critical component of complete biopsychosocial interventions such as those aiming to prevent health problems in people at heightened risk of developing them (i.e., secondary intervention) and those aiming to ameliorate symptoms in unwell populations (i.e., tertiary intervention). Potential intervention strategies include workplace policies that promote couples spending more time together, prioritizing programs aimed to help distressed couples communicate in a healthier and more supportive way, and policies in clinical settings to include romantic partners in the treatment of health problems.

External literature cited

Farrell, A. K., Imami, L., Stanton, S. C., & Slatcher, R. B. (2018). Affective processes as mediators of links between close relationships and physical health. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 12*(7), e12408. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12408>



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