



**Royal Air Force
Benevolent Fund**

GROWING UP IN THE RAF

THE WELLBEING OF
CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE WHO HAVE
SERVING PARENTS

airplay
RAF Benevolent Fund Supporting the RAF Family

Many thousands of children and young people have parents who are serving in the RAF. This report from the RAF Benevolent Fund looks at how this affects their wellbeing, and how they can be better supported.

Our important new research report is the first in-depth study of the wellbeing of children and young people who have one or both parents serving in the RAF. The report gives a voice to children and young people who are growing up with one or both parents in the RAF. Its insights can:

- help parents, teachers and other professionals better understand the children and young people they are supporting, and
- help policymakers and service providers to develop better policies and services, to support the wellbeing of children and young people.



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FOREWORDS



I fully support this *Growing up in the RAF* research report undertaken by the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund. I know from my own experience in the Army, the challenges and disruption being part of a service family brings.

I am delighted to note that the Royal Air Force have already committed to work with the Fund in taking their recommendations forward. Importantly, this research very usefully complements work already underway in the other services, and at Defence level, all designed to ensure that we not only listen carefully to the distinct and significant group of children and young people, but also take prompt and appropriate action on what we hear.

Supporting the younger generation is not only important for promoting and improving their mental wellbeing today but also acts as a bedrock for their health and happiness as adults in the future. The development of key life skills such as resilience, self-awareness, and the ability to communicate feelings are particularly important for children who experience separation and frequent moves.

It is also deeply encouraging to see another example of what can be achieved when our services and service charities work closely together to respond to the many challenges faced by our families in these uncertain times, and I thank the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund for all they do to support our airmen and airwomen, and their families.

I hope everyone involved in the lives of the children and young people with serving parents take note of this research so together we can have a positive impact on the wellbeing of children and young people growing up with one or both parents serving in the RAF.

Johnny Mercer MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
for Defence People and Veterans



I am delighted to see the results of this timely and insightful research, which is underpinned by the first-hand accounts of 95 children from their experiences of living in a Royal Air Force family. To hear the voice of children and young people is incredibly important and it is imperative that we take on board their feedback and use it to enhance the support that is provided for them. I am acutely aware that, whether children are living on a station or elsewhere in the UK or Overseas, they face unique challenges from having one or both parents serving in the Royal Air Force.

The Royal Air Force and the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund have worked side-by-side for more than 100 years to support our personnel and their families and I am looking forward to working with the Fund to take forward the report's recommendations.

Air Vice-Marshal Maria Byford
Chief of Staff Personnel and Air Secretary



I am proud to introduce this report which is the first of its kind to look exclusively at the impact of RAF service life on children growing up in the UK.

It builds on existing influential studies into the impact of military life on families, including the Children's Commissioner's report from 2018, *Kin and Country: Growing up as an Armed Forces child*, and the recent *Living in our Shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families*, commissioned by the Ministry of Defence in 2020.

Since this research was conducted, the Covid-19 pandemic has emerged and presented additional challenges for the RAF Family. Our response has included making £2.5K available for each RAF station to provide activity and wellbeing packs for RAF children during lockdown, and the expansion of our counselling provision to include children and young people.

We look forward to seeing the difference that this research makes over the months and years ahead and to working with others to achieve this.

Air Vice-Marshal Chris Elliot CB CBE
Controller, RAF Benevolent Fund

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our new research report – *Growing up in the RAF: The wellbeing of children and young people who have serving parents* – provides the first in-depth look at the wellbeing of children and young people with one or both parents serving in the RAF.

The report gives children and young people's own perspectives on this important subject. Some 34,000 children have one or more parents who are serving RAF personnel.

Life with a parent serving in the RAF certainly has its positives: it can be fun and exciting, and it can give children opportunities that they would not otherwise have had. Children and young people are often proud of their parents. In many cases, this inspires children to pursue a career in the Armed Forces themselves.

At the same time, the report shows that having a parent in the RAF can also be sad, hard and worrying for children and young people.

Children and young people with parents in the RAF have added stresses, especially in relation to the deployment of a parent and frequent station moves.

Deployment can make children anxious about their parents' health and safety. It can also put more stress on the at-home parent, resulting in additional responsibilities for children and young people.

Frequent postings can mean having to adjust to new surroundings and leaving friends behind.

Though service children are often seen as being resilient, they need to know that it is okay to experience and express negative feelings. And there is more we can be doing to support the children of RAF personnel.

upsetting stressful
good sad fun difficult
hard cool worrying scary
different bad exciting

Words used to describe what it is like to be a child in the RAF Family.

THE REPORT RECOMMENDS:

- the RAF Benevolent Fund's counselling service for young people be promoted more widely.
- family counselling be promoted more widely (family counselling is available to RAF families, funded by the RAF Benevolent Fund).
- further support be provided to RAF personnel, to help them understand the feelings their children may be having, and how these children can be supported. This could be through the RAF Benevolent Fund's Thrive programme of webinars and workshops, as well as its station grants programme.
- wellbeing support should be further developed within the RAF Benevolent Fund's Airplay programme for children and young people, including providing information and resources within the Airplay Connect digital platform.
- schools and other professionals should use the Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance's new *Thriving Lives Toolkit*, to increase understanding of the challenges service children and young people may be experiencing.
- the deployment information provided to RAF personnel and their partners be reviewed to ensure that the findings of this research are fully reflected, including the support that is available.



INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS RESEARCH AND WHY NOW?

At the RAF Benevolent Fund, we use research (some of it commissioned from others, some carried out ourselves) to provide insight into the RAF Family and its needs, and to ensure that the Fund's welfare provision is informed by current evidence.

Our previous research reports have focused on adult members of the RAF Family, but it was becoming increasingly clear that we also need to better understand the experience of children and young people with serving parents.

Our Listening and Counselling Service was receiving increased enquiries from serving parents relating to their children. The Airplay Youth Forum in 2019 also highlighted mental wellbeing as a key area of concern among RAF children and young people themselves.

The Fund's Welfare Strategy makes mental wellbeing a priority within the RAF Family.

We know that military life can be very different from civilian life, with both positive and negative aspects. The added stresses of having one or more serving parents are not always understood in schools and wider society.

Most existing research on this subject is from the US – it has found that children and young people who have a parent in the military are more likely to have accessed mental health services when one or both parents are deployed.

There have been studies of UK military families showing that deployment can be especially difficult, leading to stress and anxiety, changing family structures and roles.

But there had been no RAF-specific studies looking just at the wellbeing of children and young people. Most previous studies also gathered data from the parents' perspective, rather than listening to children and young people themselves.

HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

The RAF Benevolent Fund's 2018 *Meeting the Needs of the Serving RAF Community* report estimated that there were 34,000 dependent children in the RAF community.

WHAT WERE THE AIMS OF THE RESEARCH?

The study looked specifically at the wellbeing of children and young people who have one or both parents in the RAF.

It aimed to understand what life is like for these children and young people and to make recommendations for improving the support that they receive.

METHODOLOGY

The research we conducted involved working collaboratively with Action for Children (who are currently delivering the Fund's Airplay programme) and the RAF Community Support Team.

We did not start with a hypothesis regarding the concerns that children and young people might have; rather we allowed concerns and issues around wellbeing to emerge from the responses that the children and young people themselves provided.

We asked children and young people themselves about their wellbeing, and what their lives are like. We did not ask parents on their behalf. This was about hearing the voices of children and young people and this included consulting with them in designing the research.

The emphasis was on qualitative research, through focus groups. A total of 95 children and young people took part, aged between five and 16, in 10 focus groups in five different locations: Lincolnshire (covering RAF Scampton, RAF Waddington, RAF College Cranwell, RAF Digby and RAF Coningsby), RAF Odiham, RAF Brize Norton, and an Airplay South Consultation Group and Airplay North Consultation Group.

RESEARCH ETHICS AND CONSENT

As the research involved children and young people as participants, we were careful to follow the British Psychological Society's *Code of Human Research Ethics*. We paid the utmost respect to children and young people's autonomy, privacy and dignity, as the fieldwork involved asking questions about sensitive aspects of their lives.

We obtained the informed prior consent of participants and their parents and we made sure that support was on hand in case distressing issues arose.

34,000
THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO
ARE ESTIMATED TO HAVE A
PARENT OR PARENTS WHO
ARE SERVING IN THE RAF

FOR THE
REPORT WE
SPOKE TO:

95 CHILDREN
AND YOUNG
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10 FOCUS
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IN

5 LOCATIONS
AROUND
THE UK

RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. THE WELLBEING OF CHILDREN WITH A PARENT IN THE RAF

We found that children and young people see many positive aspects to having a parent in the RAF. They often spoke of their pride in what their parents do, and the opportunities that it gives them. However, many of them told us that growing up in the RAF can also be 'sad or upsetting', 'hard or difficult' and 'worrying'.

The children and young people who said that they were 'sad' or 'upset' gave two main reasons. First, they missed their parents when they had to go away:

"It's sad when they go away, because you don't get to see them until the very end."

And secondly, going away meant parents missing out on important life events:

"It's quite sad because my dad, when he goes away, he normally misses my birthday and Christmas."

Children and young people found things 'hard or difficult' because of having to move home frequently, which means leaving friends behind:

"It's kind of difficult sometimes because you make new friends at your school, and then you've got to move again because, when your family moves, you've got to move."

"It's kind of difficult sometimes because you make new friends at your school, and then you've got to move again."

Those children and young people who found life with an RAF parent 'worrying' spoke about parents being away, especially if they were deployed to a dangerous area:

"It can be quite worrying if someone's in a very high-risk zone."

Uncertainty also leads to feelings of being worried or scared due to not knowing what is happening to a parent when they are deployed, or when they will next have to make a station move:

"It's kind of scary, because you don't know if you're going to get posted at what time."

A picture emerges of children and young people who are active and enjoy participating in different activities, but whose wellbeing is affected by added pressures.

The two main stresses that were brought up in the discussion were:

- a parent being deployed, and
- frequent home moves.

2. DEPLOYMENT

It can be hard and stressful for a child or young person when an RAF parent is deployed away from home:

"I didn't see my dad that much because obviously he was at work 'til quite late hours and then always working [in the evenings/weekends when he was] at home. And then, obviously, when he was deployed, I didn't see him for months at a time."

The main themes that arose from the research were that, from a child's and young person's view:

- deployment means that there is more stress on the parent who remains at home
- there is a change of atmosphere or routine at home when someone is away, and
- there is a change in the child or young person's emotional wellbeing.

"It put a lot of stress on the parent that is home."

Deployment can mean that there is a shift in family roles, with children and young people having to take on extra caring responsibilities. Some young people told us that it can also be difficult for returning parents to settle back into their pre-existing roles.

"I didn't see my dad that much."



3. FREQUENT HOME MOVES

Frequent home moves are usually inevitable aspects of life in a military family, and children and young people with serving parents are likely to have experienced a move to a new location at least once in their lives.

For children and young people, station moves involve not just moving to a new house, but also to a new school, with new classmates and new teachers. This can all be difficult to adapt to.

Above all, moving means losing friends:

"You make really good friends and then you have to leave them. And it's really hard."

Children and young people can find themselves continually having to form new friendships, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

Other factors to consider include the sheer disruption that moving causes, with belongings in packing boxes.

There is disruption to children's education – for example moving schools may mean that children and young people miss certain lessons or repeat what they have already learned.

Finally, as well as having to adapt to their new environment, children and young people often miss the people, places and things that they leave behind.



"You make really good friends and then you have to leave them."

4. WORRIES

Asked 'what worries you sometimes?', the main theme that emerged was that children and young people worry about their parents: specifically about their parents' safety and their health.

These feelings often intensify if their parents are away or are deployed:

"I worry mostly about them and how my mum feels and stuff, because her mental health is really bad."

Asked what would help with their worry, the main theme that came up across all the focus groups was having someone to talk to; someone who children and young people can trust and rely on to share any anxious thoughts.

Having the support network of family and friends and counsellors or other professionals can be helpful in stressful times:

"Sometimes just having someone to talk to about it can help."

But while receiving help from a family member is important, this can be hard if the anxieties or feelings of sadness are due to a parent being away, as the other family members may also be upset.

Some groups discussed having a safe space to express their feelings, having somewhere to go if they want to talk or are feeling sad or anxious; a neutral place they can go to just to be themselves.

A final common theme that emerged was the need for more support for families who face the deployment of a parent. Some children suggested activities to distract them:

"I think something that would help is something where the RAF provides people whose parents are away with trips out, like they take them out for a day, just to help take their minds off it and enjoy it."

Activities of this nature already take place, although some children and young people do not seem to be aware of them.

And while children and young people have many different coping strategies, it is important that these are genuinely helpful to the child or young person, and do not simply give the impression that they are coping well. Although distraction can work in the short term, ideally children should also be able to acknowledge any painful or difficult feelings.

"Sometimes just having someone to talk to about it can help."

5. POSITIVES OF HAVING A SERVING PARENT

Finally, it is important to recognise that many positive aspects of having a parent in the RAF were mentioned in the focus groups. Pride was mentioned frequently:

"It can be very hard, but it can make you feel very proud of your family. And it just makes you feel like they're awesome and unique."

Other tangible benefits include military discounts and fun days, parents having secure jobs, and the prospect of experiencing new places and meeting new people:

"It opens up lots of different opportunities for you."

Many of the children and young people in the focus groups had a sense of there being a trade-off between the positive and negative aspects of having an RAF parent.

Finally, children and young people mentioned the development of resilience and adaptability as being a positive aspect of having a parent in the RAF. While children and young people with a serving parent are frequently seen as being resilient, it is important that they also know that it is okay to not be okay.

“ It can make you feel very proud of your family.”



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Life with a parent serving in the RAF has its positives. It can be fun and exciting, and children and young people are often proud of their parents.

At the same time, our research shows that having a parent in the RAF can be sad, hard and worrying for children and young people. They experience added stresses, especially in relation to deployment and frequent home moves.

To help provide better support for children and young people growing up in the RAF, we make a number of recommendations.



■ Since this research started, the Fund has launched a counselling service for children and young people, but awareness of it needs to be raised. The RAF Benevolent Fund's counselling service for children and young people should be promoted more widely. This is particularly important, given what some children and young people told us about worrying about their parents, and not finding it easy to share this with them. They need other people they can talk to.

■ There are also times when family counselling can be helpful, as it enables the whole family to communicate better and to understand one another. This can be especially important, as the wellbeing of the whole family is often dependent on the good mental wellbeing of the parents. Family counselling should also be promoted more widely (family counselling is available to RAF families, funded by the RAF Benevolent Fund).

■ Further support should be provided to RAF personnel, to help them understand the feelings that their children may be having, and how these children can be supported. This could be through the RAF Benevolent Fund's Thrive programme of webinars and workshops, as well as its station grants programme.

- Wellbeing support should be further developed within the RAF Benevolent Fund's Airplay programme for children and young people. Airplay offers support to children and young people with one or both parents serving in the RAF, providing youth workers, supervised activities and a digital platform to enable young people to be connected and to thrive. This increased support could include providing additional information and resources within the Airplay Connect digital platform.
- Schools and other professionals should make use of the Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance's new *Thriving Lives Toolkit*, to increase

understanding of the challenges that service children and young people may be experiencing. The toolkit, which is underpinned by rigorous research and has been thoroughly tested in schools, provides schools with guidance and resources, including an introductory animation, overview of evidence, and case studies.

- The deployment information provided to RAF personnel and their partners should be reviewed to fully reflect the findings of this research – discussing the effect that deployment can have on children and young people, and the support that is available.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks go to a large number of people who have contributed to the success of this project.

Ultimately this research would not have been possible without the children and young people who participated. An extra special thanks goes to them; this report is their voice.

We would also like to acknowledge the considerable assistance we were given by RAF Community Support and Action for Children, especially their staff who helped arrange and host the focus groups. Special thanks must also go to the schools and Airplay youth groups which participated in the focus groups.

We are grateful for support and encouragement throughout from:

Dr Hannah Brooking – Welfare Research Executive, RAF Benevolent Fund

Alison Wyman – Associate Director of Strategy and Programmes, RAF Benevolent Fund

Jenny Withers – Chief Community Development Advisor, RAF Community Support

Mark Davis – Former Head of Youth Support – Airplay, Action for Children

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The RAF Benevolent Fund is the leading welfare charity supporting current and former members of the RAF, their partners and families, providing practical, emotional and financial support whenever they need us.

The Fund has stood side by side with the RAF Family for over 100 years. The support for children and young people currently includes:

- Airplay and Ben Clubs, which provide stimulating activities for children and young people on RAF stations, and the Airplay Connect digital platform
- grant funding for RAF stations to support needs such as stay and play activities, parenting support, play parks and childcare centres, and
- counselling for young people aged five to 18 and for families.

The opening of three play parks close to RAF Wittering, for children from service families to use, by Her Royal Highness, The Countess of Wessex.

FIND OUT

MORE

For more information about
this research and the work
of the RAF Benevolent Fund:

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