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Navigating modern communication: Royal Air Force service children and partners' experiences of communication

Abigail Wood, Leanne Gray and Matt Fossey

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Introduction

Methods for communication have changed significantly in the past decade with the development of a range of internet-based communication options offering instant messaging and video calls. This includes but is not limited to Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted much of the general population to become more familiar with communication technology in order to remain connected with friends and family, attend school and work, and much more.

Despite this increase in internet-based communication options, there is little research exploring how UK military families make use of these methods to maintain relationships during periods of separation. In 2022, the Veterans and Families Institute for Military Social Research (VFI) published the '*Dropping in and out*' report¹ exploring how Royal Navy families utilised social media and internet-based communication to support parent-child communication. Our findings highlighted some of the unique benefits of social media and internet-based communication that naval families experienced. These benefits included ease of use, the immediacy of instant messaging, the ability to stay up to date in each other's day-to-day lives via regular updates and photos, and specific benefits related to video calls (e.g., the more personal nature of video calls compared with audio calls allowing for a more genuine connection).

However, alongside these benefits, a range of practical barriers to using social media and internet-based methods were reported, including poor internet accessibility, time differences, costs, and communication blackouts ('Operation MINIMISE'). Families also discussed the unique challenges they faced related to the increased expectation for regular communication due to the improved access and frequency of communication afforded by internet-based methods. For some, this related to challenges around determining how much to share about challenging situations they may face at home. In some cases, families described their experiences of upset and concern for their loved one's safety when there were interruptions in calls or periods of no communication.

1. Wood A., Bowser-Angermann J., Gray L., Fossey M., and Godier-McBard L. (2022), '[Dropping in and out: Social Media and Internet-based communication amongst Naval Families during separation.](#)

Introduction

Why was this study conducted?

Findings from the “*Dropping in and Out*”² report highlighted how naval families’ experiences varied by their separated partner’s location, including differences between ship and land-based deployments and roles. Based on this, it is important to understand how communication may differ for families within the unique context of the other military service branches, including the RAF. Additionally, with RAF service personnel embarking on roles on Aircraft carriers, it was also an opportune moment to reflect on the experiences of families who may be experiencing a ship-based deployment for the first time.

The aim of this project was to explore how RAF families communicate during periods of separation from their serving family member, and if (and how) they utilise social media and internet-based communication. By examining the challenges some faced in navigating communication and importantly what worked well for their family, this report adds insights into how to best support RAF families to maintain quality family communication, including making a series of practical recommendations to the Ministry of Defence, and the military charitable and third sector.

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Thank you to all those who supported the project by sharing recruitment materials. It would not have been possible to complete this research without the support of all of the above.



2. Wood A., Bowser-Angermann J., Gray L., Fossey M., and Godier-McBard L. (2022), ['Dropping in and out': Social Media and Internet-based communication amongst Naval Families during separation.](#)

Project methods

What do we mean by social media and internet-based communication?

Within this report, we explore how families make use of the recent developments in social media and internet-based communication within approximately the last decade. This is as compared with more traditional forms of communication methods including phone calls, letters, and parcels via the British Forces Post Office's Enduring Families Free Mail Service³, and Forces Free Air Letters (often nicknamed 'blueys')⁴.

We took a broad definition of social media and internet-based communication as 'internet-based applications that allow users to generate and exchange content' in order to include a range of different internet-based communication methods that RAF families may use⁵.

For the purpose of this project, we consider email to fall within the group of traditional forms of communication as it is not generally considered in the same terms as social media and newer internet-based technologies.

What did this research involve?

This project sought to answer a series of exploratory research questions:

1. How did RAF families communicate during periods of separation from their serving family member?
2. Were social media and internet-based methods utilised?
3. What worked well to support family communication?

3. You can read more about how the BPF0 here: [Contacting deployed Service personnel > RAF Families Federation \(raf-ff.org.uk\)](https://www.raf-ff.org.uk/contacting-deployed-service-personnel)

4. A 'bluey' is an aerogram, provided to enable contact between Service personnel and their families during deployment, and named due to the blue paper on which letters are written.

5. Kaplan AM., Haenlein M. (2010) [Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media; 53\(1\):59-68](#)

Project methods

This was not limited to solely communication during operational deployment. Participants discussed communication experiences during deployment on exercise and during training. However, discussion of other forms of separation such as ‘weekending’⁶ was limited.

We conducted a mix of virtual and in-person interviews and focus groups with 17 young people who had a parent serving as a regular in the RAF aged between 11-21 and 9 partners of currently serving RAF regular personnel who had children under 21.

Young people were presented with two short example stories describing a young person and a parent’s experience of communicating during a period of separation and asked to reflect on their communication experiences. Young people were also asked a series of broad and simple questions about how they communicate with their parents during periods of separation, the positives and challenges of using social media and internet-based communication, and what changes they thought would make communicating easier.

Interviews with partners covered the same topics with age-appropriate questions and prompts to delve into more detail as needed. All interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, allowing the interviewee’s experiences of communication to direct the questions asked.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data was then reflexively thematically analysed⁷.

6. Routine separation during the working week due the distance between work location and family home.

7. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). [Using thematic analysis in psychology](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2), 77-101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). [One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in \(reflexive\) thematic analysis?](#) *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328-352.

How did families communicate?

Social media and internet-based communication as the norm

All partners and young people discussed using social media and internet-based communication significantly during periods of separation; for many this was their main and preferred communication method. However, for a few families this was used in a more equal combination with traditional texts and phone calls. This was often related to the accessibility of social media and internet-based methods, which varied depending on the location of the serving parent.

“He was eight months on the [ship]. It didn’t work as well because they didn’t have great internet access, so for the first month I think it was all we had was emails and the boats would get like one email a day, I think. [...] And then when he was in port, we would then be able to video calls and stuff. We try and call each other at least once a day, but because of him moving around so much with the boat sometimes and everything, he probably only got to speak to the kids once a week.”

RAF Partner

Partners and young people used a range of internet-based methods to stay connected. Primarily they discussed instant messaging, predominately via WhatsApp, and video calls including Facetime and WhatsApp.

Families shared a range of reasons why they preferred or mainly used social media and internet-based methods, including the ability to make video calls, increased security via encryption, the instantaneous nature of communication, cost-effectiveness, and the ability to share photos, videos, emojis, and GIFs. As one might expect, many of the reasons people used these methods overlapped with what families reported were the main benefits of social media and internet-based methods, for example making video calls.

“Probably FaceTime because you can put weird filters on.”

RAF Young Person

“So for security reasons we tend to use WhatsApp, we don’t tend to give anything away. But it’s encrypted so it’s a little bit safer for just general kind of chat.”

RAF Partner

How did families communicate?

Additionally, young people spoke about communicating with parents whilst playing games online, such as Fortnite, Roblox, and app games. In many cases, this involved real-time communication either via the integrated chat and call functions built into the game or console, or a separate voice call. In some cases, asynchronous turn-based games allowed families to play at a distance.

“Because I have an Xbox and my dad has a PlayStation, he would take his PlayStation and we'd play together. And we talked together on... on the game and we'd just play together on the game.”

RAF Young Person

“So when I knew he wasn't working I send him like a quick game of Battleships on Snapchat. I would... and then we play Battleships from a room.”

RAF Young Person

The continued role of physical methods of communication

Whilst many families predominately communicated via social media and internet-based communication methods, there was still use of traditional methods of communication such as letters, blueys, and parcels. Young people discussed their memories of sending packages for special occasions.

“The RAF does these boxes that we can do. So we can put all stuff in them and then we can send them out to him. So we put loads of stuff for Christmas when he wasn't here for that. Pretty good. Did letters in it and everything.”

RAF Young Person

A few young people commented how there was something special about physical post, discussing the effort taken by the sender and how post can be a keepsake. Partners also discussed the sentimental nature of physical post and its role in preserving memories.

Some spoke about a trade-off between the benefits of social media and internet-based communication methods, often their immediacy, and the potential to lose physical reminders to reflect upon later.

Young person A: “Well, it’s more like heartfelt isn’t it because they’ve taken their time to actually find a pen and paper and write it and...”

Young person B: “I just put them in a box or like re-tack them onto my wall. I didn’t bother to read them, I looked at the drawings!”

RAF Young Person

Some families described their recent use of blueys to communicate, sharing the fun some young people had writing to their separated parents, and their excitement in receiving a response back. However, many families did not currently make much or any use of blueys, instead discussing their use in the past. Some families described their move away from blueys in relation to their children losing interest in this form of communication with age. Others in relation to moving towards more convenient forms of communication often related to the length of time it takes for a bluey to arrive.

“Yeah, my kids love writing blueys, they love receiving them, it’s the excitement of when they get home, he’s... has Daddy written back? Or anything like that, so blueys are also good.”

RAF Partner

“We have used the Blueys in the past, but the... the kids are getting a bit older now and don’t really want to do that.”

RAF Partner

Videos from separated parents

Additionally, families discussed the use of pre-recorded videos, or internet-enabled applications or devices such as teddy bears that allowed parents and young people to record brief messages for each other during separation to be listened to in their own time. This allowed families to mark special and important occasions, and young people to connect with parents when they had time to, and when it was meaningful to them.

How did families communicate?

“We got some bears, that you recorded a message and then it goes through to a message on his phone, and then vice versa... he could record a message on his phone, so then we could... hear messages when the... when we were awake, when he was awake [...] you know it wasn't a case of us phoning him when he was asleep or flying and... it was a way of managing to keep in touch”

RAF Partner

“So when it came to sort of things like their birthdays, their first day at school they had a hospital appointment coming up with their specialist and stuff, just things like that, he pre-recorded videos. [...] So that was something good, so if he was... on the boat or if he was in a place where there was no signal or... like time differences and stuff, if he wasn't able to get a chance to call that day the kids would still have seen him and spoke to him kind of thing because of those videos.”

RAF Partner

Figuring out the 'right' amount of communication

Families discussed their decisions on how to communicate during periods of separation. This included considerations of how often to communicate, what methods work best, and whether to share challenges they might experience during periods of separation.

Some partners and young people described opting to communicate less despite access to communication methods. Some young people shared how they preferred to communicate less in order to manage the emotional impact of separation. Occasionally parents related this to being typical teenage behaviour. Partners' discussions focused more on balancing the level of communication against the day-to-day demands of managing family needs during periods of separation.

“Not that he doesn't care so much, but he kind of disassociates more. So it doesn't affect him if he does that if you know what I mean. So... he's just like right Dad's away. I know he's going to be back this time. And he's focused on the school rather than thinking about his dad too much. Obviously, he misses him, but he doesn't communicate that very well.”

RAF Partner

“I feel and I see it happening to lots of other people, there is that risk of when they're away that... that whole separation encompassing your whole day when you're already really busy and you've got dogs to walk and you've got everything else, and then on top of that you've got the pressure to try and communicate really, really fully and actually you haven't always got loads to say. Do you know what I mean?”

RAF Partner

What communication challenges did families experience?

Young people and partners shared a range of challenges including access to communication methods, finding the time to communicate, and the lack of support surrounding communication.

Finding time to communicate

Many young people and partners discussed the challenges of finding a good time to communicate with their serving family members. Families reported difficulties associated with being in different time zones, working around day-to-day life, jobs, and school timetables, and managing serving partners' busy schedules, and changing shift patterns. In some cases, variable access to the internet meant families could not make use of their preferred communication method during convenient opportunities to communicate. There was some discussion of the pressure to communicate and feelings of guilt about not communicating enough whilst navigating the pressures of day-to-day life at home.

'He'd get those all the time because he'd try and ring me before bed, and then he'd tell me a story and then I'd end up falling asleep on the call whilst he's still talking about it, and he doesn't realise!'

RAF Young Person

Navigating how to communicate

Families shared a range of challenges related to the complexities of communicating during separation. Both young people and partners discussed their experiences of tensions around how much to communicate, not knowing what to say, and having to choose what to share if and when challenges arose at home.

Tension arising from the expectations of communication

As discussed previously, some young people and partners choose to communicate less despite their access to communication methods in order to manage the emotional impact of separation or the demands of day-to-day lives. It is important to reflect here, that some partners highlighted how communication, in particular video calls, had a negative emotional impact on some young people as communication reminded them of their separation.

"Video calling him brings him back to the... sort of forethought... foremost... front of your mind again. Which maybe makes them feel uncomfortable. I don't know. But they don't... whatever it is, they don't like doing it."

RAF Partner

What communication challenges did families experience?

“Why aren’t you talking to Daddy? You know it’s kind of hurting his feelings a bit, are you not interested? And... she turned around and she said Mummy, it’s not real, and he’s not here, and it hurts too much to see him when he’s so far away.”

RAF Partner

A few partners discussed feeling a tension between expectations that they should be communicating regularly, and the reality of communicating less either due to young people’s emotional reaction to either certain methods or general communication, partners feeling too tired or unable to speak to their partner, or the difficulties finding time due to the demands of day-to-day life. One partner advised others: “don’t put pressure on yourself to do too much to kind of think I need to keep him in the loop over absolutely everything. It is pick and choose”.

“You kind of... you feel guilty, they're your partner you want to tell them things. But likewise you’ve still got twenty jobs to do before you can even think about sitting down that night. And it’s trying to balance that need to kind of keep them in the loop, but yet you know your own mental health is going to suffer if you don’t get the other things done.”

RAF Partner

“And also, emotions, if you're not feeling particularly wanting to speak to them, or he doesn’t want to talk to us because he misses home or... I don’t know, yeah.”

RAF Partner

Families recalled times when they had found themselves unsure of what to say on calls which could lead to feelings of awkwardness. In some cases, families described making small talk to help the conversation flow.

“No, it’s probably more just because it’s awkward because I haven’t seen him in a while.”

RAF Young Person

“Oh, I hate it when it’s like... you’ve been talking for like a certain amount of time and there's just anybody... and you just stop talking because no one has anything else to say for like a... two minutes and you're just like... (makes an exaggerated pause for effect)”.

RAF Young Person

What communication challenges did families experience?

Choosing what to share

Both young people and partners described making choices about what to share with their loved ones. Both groups described not sharing some challenging situations because of their desire not to add to their serving partner or parents' preexisting stressors. Partners often articulated making choices on a case-by-case basis depending on whether or not their partner could do something to support the challenge.

"Main challenges are... stress and worry. If there's something going on at home, I don't want to talk to him because I don't ... him to worry, I don't want him to stress out because he can't do anything because he's not there."

RAF Partner

"If I was concerned it was going to affect what he was doing out there, then I wouldn't say. But generally, we... is... we're open about what's going on."

RAF Partner

It is important to reflect that young people understood the demands of their parent's role and consciously chose to tailor what they share due to concerns about their parent's wellbeing.

Young person A: "It depends... it depends on what it is and... how he's feeling at the moment."

Young person B: "If he's stressed, I won't tell him, like it puts it on him. That makes him have to sort something else out. If it's a small... couple of small things, I'll tell him the small things. But if it's one big thing that I don't want to share, I won't share. [...]"

Young person C: "Not really because like if he's like at work or something, he's already got a lot to think about. So, I don't want to add on to his worries. [...]"

Young person D: "Well, I tell him I miss him. I kind of keep what's happening at school to myself, so obviously he's away, he's going through a lot anyway. So, I don't really want to push that onto him when he's so far away and he can't do anything."

RAF Young People

What communication challenges did families experience?

Unstable connections

Many young people and partners shared their experiences of poor and unstable internet connections. Communication infrastructure available to the serving parent varied by location; some partners commented specifically on changing access when their partner was deployed on a ship. Several spouses and a few young people commented about the poor connection they experienced at home making it challenging to utilise social media and internet-based methods despite their serving partner having access. In some cases, they referred to internet access in service family accommodation.

“Because on the base [U.K.] Wi-Fi is really bad”.

RAF Young People

“Yeah. Because it’s out in the middle of nowhere, isn’t it?”

RAF Partner

Young people spoke about the challenges of communicating on poor quality internet calls, for example, calls ‘lagging or crackling’. Most commonly, poor-quality calls were characterised as ‘annoying’ by young people. They shared their frustrations at not realising when calls had a significant lag or had dropped off which resulted in them having to repeat what they were trying to say. In some cases, numerous drop-offs or significant lag meant young people gave up trying to share or forgot what they were hoping to tell their parents. Others described persevering through interrupted calls.

“That’s the most annoying thing ever. I’ll be talking about something really important, and I’ll be really into it, I’ve come to an end, calls off... but I can’t remember the start so I can’t explain it again. It’s really annoying.”

RAF Young Person

Some partners similarly commented that they found inconsistent connections frustrating or annoying. Additionally, some shared examples of their children’s negative emotional reactions to poor-quality calls, for example getting worried about missing what their parent is saying or becoming distressed.

What communication challenges did families experience?

“freezes, falls apart, and then... particularly with [name], she would just get you know distressed, I can't see him properly, I don't want to”.

RAF Partner

Deployment resources

A few partners discussed how resources developed to support deployments were not age-appropriate for their older teenage children. Whilst this challenge is not solely communication-related and presents a more general challenge for families managing deployments, older children may be missing out on activities aimed to support young children's parent-child communication. For example, colouring sheets that they can send to parents. Indeed, one partner who also had a role providing deployment resources shared her challenge in crafting age-appropriate boxes based on what was available to her.

“We... we do receive a deployment box, which is lovely, it's... it's a thought and... to be fair that's all it is, it's a thought. It's not looked at the age of your children, I mean... to have my fifteen-year-old son have a colouring face mask is not his... that's not right.”

RAF Partner

Postal challenges

A few partners discussed their challenges with the overseas postal system. They described experiencing significant delays as well as instances of missing post and packages. In some cases, the impact of delays or lost items was compounded as they were sent to mark a special occasion. For some, their frustration with the unreliable system informed their choice to make little or no use of the overseas post.

“so, they're good, but they literally take about three weeks normally to come... three to four weeks. So, by the time you've got it and send one back [LAUGH] or depends on how long the tour is, you could only really send a couple”.

RAF Partner

How can we best support family communication?

The benefits of using social media and internet-based communication

It was clear from the interviews with young people and partners that social media and internet-based communication methods had benefits for maintaining family communication during separation.

Ease of social media and internet-based methods

Many partners shared how social media and internet-based communication, when accessible, had made communication much easier than solely using traditional methods. Partners commented on the improved access to communication allowing for more frequent and immediate interactions compared to postal communication, and more flexibility with timings and access on the go.

“So now it’s much easier. Hugely easier. Got a family WhatsApp that everybody puts stuff on ... we've been married twenty-two years, he... it was an absolute nightmare. Initially you just wrote blueys, the old-fashioned blueys that you got. And off they went, and you’d wait and wait and wait and wait and wait for an answer or something, and then he'd send back a bluey with nothing answered that you asked the questions... so that was very... very... early married, it would drive me insane.”

RAF Partner

“I think as technology has evolved it’s become easier”.

RAF Partner

Video calls

Both young people and partners discussed the positives of being able to see their serving parent via video calls. Both groups shared how they enjoyed seeing the changes to their serving parents’ appearances and gaining an understanding of their lives whilst separated.

“And when he’s away he doesn’t cut his hair or anything, so it’s quite nice seeing that journey.”

RAF Young Person

How can we best support family communication?

“For me, I like to see where he is and what kind of environment, he’s in, because sometimes he can't tell me and that’s fine. But obviously seeing like where he’s... even sleeping, and the situation that he’s going through, makes me better understand what he has to do. [...] If... if you see it on a video then you understand and you go ah right that’s what you mean sort of thing.”

RAF Partner

Young people discussed how communicating via video calls felt more real and natural than audio calls making it easier to have a conversation with their serving parent and express what they might like to share. Additionally, some partners commented that video calls felt more conversational and lasted longer than traditional phone calls.

“Like you can actually see them. Yeah! It’s more like they're there in a way”.

RAF Young Person

“You can kind of say what you want that... in like a tone that you wouldn’t really be able to say in a letter. And you’d be able to... you know express what you want to say and everything.”

RAF Young Person

“I think it is much more because you're able to see each other, you're able to get that visual feedback as well as just the verbal feedback. And I think for [partner’s name] he feels like he’s having more of a conversation rather than just... you know making sure that everything’s okay.”

RAF Partner

Both partners and young people commented on the benefits of being able to do things on video calls whilst communicating. For partners, the discussion centred on the ability to multitask. In some cases, a sense of involving the serving parent in the normalcy of the day-to-day at home came through for example being able to ‘potter about’ whilst on calls. Young people described the benefits of being able to show their parents special objects such as awards or new toys and clothes prompting conversations and keeping the serving parent up to date about these small developments.

“There was something on the TV show like I could dance to, or I'd just got a new teddy or something, that I'd to show like... and spend half an hour talking about that or showing that, it was really funny”.

RAF Young Person

How can we best support family communication?

'he's not a communicative person, he is, but I think having that face-to-face connection... and like you say just being able to potter about and you can cook dinner together and you can just be doing... you know he's ironing his kit or whatever, and I'm just you know pottering about tidying up. And it's not just a case of like right I've got to be on the phone and I'm having this conversation and then we're doing other stuff.'

RAF Partner

Some young people spoke of the worry they can experience about their parents' safety, in some cases this was generalised worry or related to rumour that someone had been injured. There was some discussion of worry related to parents being unable to communicate.

"I think it's worrying about not knowing what happens to them. Like say if they're late for a call and they cannot call from work. You don't know exactly... you don't know anything about what happens."

RAF Young Person

Young people also discussed how being able to speak to their parents, in particular via video calls, helped to ease the worry by confirming that they are ok. Our findings suggest that the increased access and immediacy of social media and internet-based methods makes it easier for young people to check in with their serving parent. Although, the reassurance of being able to contact your serving parent was not solely limited to these internet-based methods.

"Yeah, so I got home crying from school that day because obviously... it's a bit upsetting and my mum phone call... video called him for me just so I could see his face and that really helped."

RAF Young Person

It is important to reflect that in one case being able to see that their parent was deployed had the opposite effect, transforming their parent's deployment from an abstract idea to reality and prompting concern for their safety.

"Because they want to just kind of blink it out. And they've got upset because they don't want to bring it to reality, [...] obviously they know he's away, but to see him away and knowing that he's so far away that then can cause anxiety for the kids sometimes."

RAF Partner

How can we best support family communication?

Immediacy of instant messages

The immediacy of instant messaging was a commonly discussed benefit for both young people and partners. Both groups described how quick responses, often described as 'real time', made it easier to keep their loved ones updated about life at home including young people's achievements, as well as challenges at home. This was often juxtaposed with letters or blueys. Both groups emphasised the benefits of instant communication compared with traditional slower methods: "It's phenomenally different. It cannot be understated."

"But it also helps though... it's a lot more... like instant, so if you've... like if you've had a bad day at school that day, you can call that day and kind of offload or talk to them then. You don't have to... then go home and write a letter, post it, wait for it to then arrive."

RAF Young Person

"They could be round the corner because it's so quick, and so instant. Where before having all of those things you... there was a real sense of that distance, and you know and the... the not knowing."

RAF Partner

"You don't think much happens on a day-to-day basis, but actually the little things that do happen you can... they can still be involved. And then when you have a conversation oh... you know how did it go with the washing... I know... do you know what I mean? Just stupid things. Did you manage to get that up? Did you fix that? Whatever. Whereas it... if you... there's no point telling them that, oh by the way the washing machine I fixed it. You know... a week later [LAUGH] not interesting... not interesting to anyone! But if they've involved in it, oh my God the washing machines broken, and I've got ten loads of washing to do! Then it... then... you're part of the family aren't you as opposed to being an outsider looking in."

RAF Partner

How can we best support family communication?

Community support

Partners spoke about the role of community support in facilitating successful communication, as well as generally supporting families during periods of separation. They discussed the importance of having a sense of community and knowing where to turn for support with communication issues, for example, if there were issues with their personal phone. Some partners positively commented on resources available to families to promote communications. One partner spoke passionately about the benefits of a relationship course run on base, that had a segment on communication. She discussed how proactively working on partner-to-partner communication prior to separation builds strength to navigate the challenges together.

“You know the community support team here are amazing. So I think they're really good at trying to find ways of keeping people in contact. And they do like lovely packs and things like that. But they're also... they also do things for the families that are left behind. But I'm sure if... if for instance everything failed here, they would lend me a phone or they would lend me a computer. I know where to go if I was at a loss”.

RAF Partner

“The course they did [...] about relationships, brilliant! Absolutely brilliant. There's a whole section in there about communication. Building something like that for when they're not deployed or not upcoming deployments, so you're building a relationship and strengthening it before they go. But not because they're going will just help across the board.”

RAF Partner

School support

Both young people and partners spoke positively about occasions where schools have supported communication via clubs for military children or specific permissions for individual young people to contact their parents during the school day. This may help some families combat the challenges discussed around finding time to communicate. Young people described how clubs for military children help to support the parent-child relationship by having sessions to write a letter, make care packages, or send emails.

How can we best support family communication?

Young people also discussed the general peer support these clubs provided giving them space to talk to other service children, engage in group activities, and mark significant days like Remembrance Day.

“The school was very good at because I would explain you know the children are there in the week, they come home at the weekend, they don’t see their father for whatever reason, so it’s... you know tough that it’s in the middle of English! [LAUGH] It just has to be!”

RAF Partner

“In school they used to be in the [group name]. And it was like a load of... group of children and they were... all our parents who are in the military. And we would like talk about it, and we would like make like care packages and stuff. And put in like letters and stuff, and then send it to our parent and then they would send us a video back, it was really fun”.

RAF Young Person

However, this support can be sporadic, with one partner highlighting the importance of parents proactively informing schools, so they are aware of children and young people’s needs and know how they can best support them.

“So they give them that extra help, and also she could send emails to him, so she actually did that and that was really helpful, that was the best thing I think for her. My son didn’t have that at his school, but he was alright, he didn’t really want to you know chat to his dad too much.”

RAF Partner

How did families suggest communication could be better supported?

We asked both young people and partners “Is there any support or changes that you think would help make communicating as a family easier?”. Analysis of interviews and focus groups revealed the following common suggestions.

Better Wi-Fi

Some young people and partners wanted to see Wi-Fi access improve, referring to the access of the serving partner. However, partners were pragmatic, reflecting on the feasibility of improved access in deployment, such as in the example below:

“But I know realistically it wouldn’t... it wouldn’t be able to happen. Probably better access to those things when in port. Because we did find that when he was in port they would set up an area and they’d go oh yeah if you want to use the Wi-Fi you know the box is there, it’s in that tent. But because there were so many of them wanting to use it because they didn’t have access to it on the boat, and so many of them wanted to you know speak to all the family and do video calls that the connection was that bad just for him to send me a picture of where he is, like a selfie or something. It would take about half hour for it to send through. [...] So on the boat I know that wouldn’t be a realistic thing to ask for, but more if it available when they’re in port and stuff. So that they can actually do those video calls and everything, I think that would make a really big difference.”

RAF Partner

Better postal service

A few partners recommended changes needed to be made to the delivery of post overseas to ensure a faster and more reliable service. Again, partners discussed the suggested changes with a pragmatic mindset such as in the example below, describing a willingness to accept lengthy waits between sending and receiving if reliability improved.

“if the service is available then it should be more dependable, like the chances of it going missing should be almost zero. Like if... if it’s... if it’s advertised to get it there in X amount of days... and we didn’t send it like the day before his birthday, we sent it like a month and a half before his birthday... or two... two months before his birthday. The changes are that you’d want it to you know reliably get there at the right time.”

RAF Partner

How did families suggest communication could be better supported?

Better deployment resources

Ways to improve current deployment resources were discussed by both groups. Partners discussed various ways deployment resources could be adapted to best support communication. Including having to opt-out of receiving support as opposed to opt-in, timely provision of information and deployment resources, specific resources to support both parent-child and partner-to-partner communication, and activities that are age-appropriate for both young and older children. Related to partner-partner communication, one partner discussed the importance of these resources including lived experience, outlining the potential challenges partners may face and what they found worked well. One partner suggested providing resources that help the serving parent proactively communicate with their child and share appropriate information about their role or deployment.

“I think having something in a booklet about these are the potential issues that others have said that they’ve faced [...] It’s not that you are going to face it, it’s that these are the... the common things. And this is how people have dealt with it and then lots of quotes from people. You just know you’re not alone.”

RAF Partner

“it’s more stuff to entertain the kids with her, and they support you with communicating with your partner, the calls and everything and things like that. But there’s not really any help trying to keep the kids in touch with the parent that’s away. [...] It’s going to be the daftest comparison. [...] But it’s the only thing that I could think of in my head is the best way to explain it. You know when you do... you see the adverts for the like the adopt a penguin! [LAUGH] Something like that that you’d... the person that’s deployed could do... So like a package, yeah, so... letters, pictures, little things from where they are and stuff.”

RAF Partner

Whilst the majority of suggested changes came from partners, young people discussed how they would enjoy crafting things to send to their separated parents potentially for special occasions like birthdays and holidays that their parents may miss. Additionally, in one focus group, children responded positively to a suggestion from a youth group supporter that resources around what it is like to communicate with a serving parent and other topics could be available in the group’s space, so they are easily accessed when needed.

How did families suggest communication could be better supported?

“It would be cool if like the like RAF like I don’t know if they really get something... but it would be cool if like they could support us with like making packages for our parents and that.”

Interviewer: What sort of thing would you like to send? Would it be like making crafts or?

“Yeah, like making crafts and making... writing.”

RAF Young Person

Ability to play games

Several young people discussed wanting to continue to or start playing games online with their serving parents whilst separated. One young person described how games and conversation aides could be developed in order to prompt conversations. Another suggested parents should take consoles and computers with them to allow for online gaming.

“I mean it... the... it’d be nice if there’s a way to get like the conversation going... like interacting... like whether that’s like questions set out to ask each other like stories or something, or games. It’d just be really nice to get the interaction going because it’s a bit hard at first, you don’t really know what to say.”

RAF Young Person

“If they... if you have like PlayStation or... like my mum does and stuff, you can play over and if they take their PlayStation out there or like a computer out there...”

RAF Young Person

Improved information provision for families

Partners discussed several ways that communication between the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and families could be improved including regular updates, direct communication to partners and children about the upcoming deployment, timely delivery of deployment resources and information, and default opt-in to receive updates, resources, and deployment boxes to ensure families to not miss out the support they might benefit from. Several discussions revealed how improved communication between the MOD can support families to maintain relationships during separation by preparing them on what to expect and providing insight into the lives of the serving parent via appropriate updates of location or pictures.

How did families suggest communication could be better supported?

“None of that happens anymore [information updates from MOD] it seems like... I think much more now as a family you are left to get on with it yourself. There's much less support from the military or from the air force obviously, I don't know the rest of it. The communication between the two is... is not... has got worse whilst communication between the family has got better”.

RAF Partner

Partners discussed their desire to have a better understanding of their partners' deployment and what might be possible in regard to communication due to infrastructure or security. Partners commented that they might not receive all the information they need when information is expected to be shared with them via their serving partner. Additionally, some expressed that directly conveying information through optional briefings would help improve not just understanding but buy-in from families.

“it's not just enough to tell the serving spouse why their comms need to be secure and how to make their comms secure. Actually, you need to have those conversations with people's partners and you need to have those conversations with kids, especially when you've got kids who are teenagers and are tech savvy and are old enough to know probably better than their parents how this stuff works. Get the kids' buy-in, include them in that kind of information. [...] And you know having... having that information sometimes from the horse's mouth rather than through the spouse can (a) you haven't got that filter where you've got that sort of slight Chinese whispers thing going and (b) actually it's not just me saying this to you because I can't be arsed to having my phone with me or you know de da de da. You know it's genuine, it actually is genuine.”

RAF Partner

Discussion of research findings

Throughout this discussion section we will relate the research findings of this project to what is known about military family communication via social media and internet-based communication within the UK context and internationally. It is clear from our findings that Royal Air Force families make use of social media and internet-based communication methods to maintain relationships during periods of separation. For many of the families we spoke to this was their main form of communication and their preferred method. This aligns with our findings amongst naval families regarding the common use of and preference for social media and internet-based communication methods⁸, as well as international findings on the use and preference for SM/IBC communication⁹. It is interesting to note how RAF young people made use of online games to connect and play with their serving parents. This raises important questions as to whether current policies and advice for families fully consider the use of in-game chat functions and the potential risk they may pose to security. As well as if serving members and families understand and observe best practise when using in-game chat functions.

Families highlighted the unique benefits of social media and internet-based methods. Our findings supported the benefits of social media and internet-based methods discussed in the UK and international literature on military family communication including ease of use, increased connectedness, and parental involvement due to the immediacy of SM/IBC, increased frequency of communication opportunities, improved ability to schedule communication around family routine, and the benefits of face-to-face communication⁹.

Families described how social media and internet-based methods made it easier to communicate due to their immediacy and allowed parents to be more flexible with timings and communicate on the go. However, families still shared difficulties, discussed below, finding time to communicate. Partners also described how the immediacy made it easier to involve their serving partner in day-to-day decision-making and parenting.

8. Wood A., Bowser-Angermann J., Gray L., Fossey M., and Godier-McBard L. (2022), ['Dropping in and out': Social Media and Internet-based communication amongst Naval Families during separation.](#)

9. Wood A., Gray L., Bowser-Angermann J., Gibson P., Fossey M., and Godier-McBard L. (2022), [Social media and Internet-based communication in military families during separation: An international scoping review](#)

Discussion of research findings

Several of the benefits of social media and internet-based methods are related to the ability to make video calls. Families discussed the benefits of being able to see their loved ones, notice their changing appearances, and gain an understanding of their serving parent's situation. Additionally, families described how video calls felt more real than audio calls, allowing for more natural conversations. Finally, the ability to show their serving person sentimental objects from home, such as school awards, and communicate whilst doing activities or daily tasks such as cooking, allowed busy partners to multi-task and prompted interesting conversations. In cases where children experienced anxiety related to their parent's safety, families discussed how they used social media and internet-based methods, particularly video calls, to reassure young people of their parent's wellbeing.

Our findings also highlight the challenges families experienced. As with the unique benefits of social media and internet-based communication, many of these challenges aligned with what was expected from the US literature¹⁰ and replicated findings from our UK naval study¹¹, including practical barriers to SM/IBC communication, challenges related to increased expectations for communication, increased choices around sharing difficult news, and negative emotional impact of unreliable SM/IBC, such as upset and anxiety. RAF families reported access issues related to unstable internet connections and issues with the overseas postal system, including significant delays and lost post. Both young people and partners discussed the challenges of finding a good time to communicate due to time differences and busy schedules including work and school despite the increased opportunities to communicate afforded by SM/IBC. Some of the benefits and challenges of SM/IBC methods are closely linked, representing two sides of the same coin. Whilst video calls were found to be helpful in reassuring young people about their parent's safety minimising worry or upset, some children and young people had negative emotional reactions to poor quality and unstable calls, and in some cases video calls were an upsetting reminder of their parent's absence.

10. Wood A., Gray L., Bowser-Angermann J., Gibson P., Fossey M., and Godier-McBard L. (2022), [Social media and Internet-based communication in military families during separation: An international scoping review](#)

11. Wood A., Bowser-Angermann J., Gray L., Fossey M., and Godier-McBard L. (2022), ['Dropping in and out': Social Media and Internet-based communication amongst Naval Families during separation.'](#)

Discussion of research findings

Additionally, whilst RAF families positively described how SM/IBC communication methods were easy to use, and where infrastructure was in place allowed them to communicate frequently, they also noted challenges associated with this. Like UK naval families in our previous study¹², increased access may compound challenges around increased communication expectations and deciding what to share with their serving family member.

Our findings, however, also extended our understanding how the challenges families faced in navigating the increased opportunities for communication that come with access to SM/IBC methods. Some partners described feeling tension between expectations that they should be communicating regularly, and the reality of communicating less due to the demands of day-to-day life during separation, being too tired, or feeling unable to speak to their serving partners. Some experienced tension due to their approach of purposely limiting communication, which they adopted to help them manage the emotional impact of separation. It is important that the Ministry of Defence, and other key stakeholders such as military charities support families to understand the potential challenges they may face and discuss how they plan to communicate regularly prior to separation, including which methods.

As discussed above, UK RAF families reported many of the same benefits and challenges related to using social media as the UK naval families in our previous study¹². However, this study added additional detail to our understanding of how military families navigate the increased access to communication afforded by SM/IBC methods, as well as the potential challenges they may experience finding the right balance of communication and choosing what to share. Whilst families' individual experiences will vary based on the nature of their separation (for example, operational vs non-operational, location, and duration) the overarching similarities between the findings of the two studies underscores the need for service branches, and third sector and charitable organisation to share lessons learned and best practice for supporting family communication. It seems likely that these benefits and challenges are shared by UK Army families who also experience significant periods of separation, and often co-deploy with other service branches.

12. Wood A., Bowser-Angermann J., Gray L., Fossey M., and Godier-McBard L. (2022), '[Dropping in and out': Social Media and Internet-based communication amongst Naval Families during separation.](#)

Discussion of research findings

However, differences in support offered to Army families, policies around information delivery to service families, and community dynamics may all impact families' experience of maintaining relationships during periods of separation.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrate the importance of wider support from both the military community and schools for successful communication. As young people spend a significant portion of the day at school, schools facilitating young people to communicate with their serving parent during the school day was key to some families overcoming the challenges of finding a good time for parent-child communication. As well as this, young people shared examples of the role of military-specific clubs that facilitated communication via activities such as letter writing or making care packages. However, this support was not consistent for all families, and thus there is further work needed to encourage schools to best support service children during separation.

A significant knowledge gap related to how UK military families communicate is how social media and internet-based communication methods impact serving personnel's experiences of separation, and their perception of their relationships with partners and children. A study¹³ undertaken to explore social media use in the Armed Forces "cuts through the private, domestic or public, personal and familial, work and home" [pg.1] gives us some insight into the potential impact on UK naval personnel. Adey et al (2016)¹³ describe how naval personnel experience intense competing demands from military life and family life when deployed because of social media. Firstly, social media was characterised as "unsettling existing practices of group socializing" [pg. 19.]. In particular, change to crews de-stressing together when Wi-Fi was available as some personnel opted to contact home during down times; "You just see everyone sat around on the Wi-Fi, Facebooking, Skyping, headphones on. All of that takes over. So, you lose a lot of that social side of...sort of de-stressing" [pg.19]. Secondly, some personnel experienced tension between family expectations of constant communications and military life, e.g., the ability to socialise with the crew on weekends. Both these effects may have an impact on personnel's readiness and wellbeing warranting further exploration.

13. Adey, P., Denney, D., Jensen, R., & Pinkerton, A. (2016) [Blurred lines: Intimacy, mobility, and the social military. Critical Military Studies.](#)

Discussion of research findings

Finally, 'The Impact of Service Life on the Military Child'¹⁴ project undertook a review of UK-focused and relevant international research on the experience of being a service child. Additionally, interviews were undertaken with military stakeholders (e.g., education, charity, third sector, and statutory providers) to add to and deepen our understanding of the challenges and benefits of Service life for children and highlight potential gaps in understanding. These preliminary discussions with military stakeholders highlighted the potential disruption to serving personnel's wellbeing and operational effectiveness that may come alongside personnel receiving bad news from their family members as a result of increased access to communication.

Our findings demonstrated that RAF and naval families are facing increased choices about what to share as a result of the increased access to social media, with some families choosing to openly share bad news, others choosing to conceal bad news, and some deciding case by case. With the potential for information regarding challenges at home being increasingly shared via personal communication as opposed to mediated channels, there exists a risk of welfare officers being unaware of the challenges serving persons may be facing, thus missing opportunities to offer support. It is imperative, therefore, that further research is undertaken to understand the potential impact that social media and internet-based methods and their increased accessibility are having on personnel's effectiveness and wellbeing.

14. Godier-McBard L, Wood A & Fossey M. (2021) [The Impact of Service Life on the Military Child: The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict – Update and Review Report.](#)

Limitations

It is important to note the limitations of this research. Due to the limited timespan of this project, we were unable to speak to currently serving RAF personnel to capture their experiences due to the restrictions placed on accessing this population by the Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Council (MODREC) regulations. Future research is needed with RAF service personnel to understand how social media and internet-based communication method impact their experience of separation, including maintaining family relationships and operational effectiveness.

We experienced significant challenges recruiting participants for this research project, despite the use of gatekeepers, such as the RAF Hive and military third sector and charitable organisations, as well as other efforts made by all project partners. This was particularly apparent for the young person sample, where there were additional difficulties contacting parents to gain their consent for their children's participation. Whilst the final sample achieved was sufficient to allow us to undertake an initial in-depth exploration of the phenomena, it is not possible to generalise our data to all families within the UK Royal Air Force.

Recommendations

To the Ministry of Defence

1. Develop formalised support resources to support RAF families' use of social media and internet-based methods and encourage families to discuss how they plan to navigate communication during periods of separation.
 - A. Outline the methods that families can use to communicate, including traditional, and social media and internet-based methods. Encourage families to consider what options will be available during their upcoming separation. Based on lived experience and available evidence, outline:
 - i. The different approaches families may take to communication, such as the use of differing methods, and regular communication versus purposefully limiting communication.
 - ii. The challenges families may experience, including young people's potential emotional reactions.
 - iii. What families have found worked well to support successful communication.
 - B. Provide information about opportunities for partners to take part in communication courses.
 - C. Utilise co-production methods, to ensure that resources are designed with families for families.
 - D. Working in collaboration with military charitable and third sector organisations to draw on their experience of, and best practice related supporting family communication.
2. Improve direct information provision about deployments for families.
 - A. Invite partners and older children to tailored pre-deployment briefings that provide appropriate information including:
 - i. Summary of expected access to communication methods, including internet access.
 - ii. Information about how to stay secure whilst using social media and internet-based communication.
 - iii. Provide a takeaway document summarising key information shared at the briefing and consider how to best brief dispersed families to ensure parity of experience.
 - B. Ministry of Defence to review the feasibility of relevant information provision to partners being defaulted to opt-out to avoid families missing out on wanted information.

Recommendations

To the Ministry of Defence

3. Ongoing assessment of internet connectivity.
 - A. Monitor and audit functional access to Wi-Fi facilities on UK and Overseas bases and deployment locations in order to highlight opportunities for improvement and provide accurate information on internet access allowing for the expectation management of service personnel and families.
 - B. Make use of existing opportunities to understand personnel's access to and experiences of communication during periods of separation via routine surveys and feedback.
 - C. This recommendation acknowledges it is likely not feasible to provide or enhance Wi-Fi in all deployment locations.

To the Military Charitable and Third Sector

4. Consider how youth group sessions can support RAF young person's communication with separate parent(s). This could include:
 - A. Working together with RAF service children to develop creative resources to support parent-child communication. This may include conversation prompts like questions and topic cards, or games that can be used over phone or video calls.
 - B. Leading conversations around different methods and styles of communication, discussing the positives and challenges experiences of communicating whilst separated, and sharing what has worked well for other service children.
5. Revise support resources, where needed, to include challenges service children may face around communication and how schools can support service children to communicate with their serving parents, in particular facilitating communication during school hours during periods of separation.

To Local Education Authorities and Academy Trusts

6. Continue to encourage schools to better support service children's needs, including raising conversations around supporting communication with separated parents.
 - A. Create a template letter for dispersed families outlining the challenges noted above to support families in proactively discussing their communication support needs with their local schools.
 - B. Encourage schools to utilise available resources to support their understanding, such as the [Service Children's Progression Alliance's thriving lives toolkit](#) and the [Armed Forces Covenant's Service Pupil Premium Resource Directory](#).

This resource has been developed as part of a National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) co-design project²¹ to support mental healthcare professionals in providing trauma-informed care to women veterans. For a comprehensive understanding of women veterans' experiences of mental health services and barriers to mental healthcare, you can read our summary report [at the Centre for Military Women's Research website](#). We also provide resources for understanding the experiences of women in the military in Appendix 2.



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