

The Impact of Participation in Extracurricular Activities on the Mental Wellbeing of Youth From Military Families in Pakistan: Exploring the Mediating Role of Social Support

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ABSTRACT

Background: Military-connected adolescents face issues like the deployment of parents and relocation to new areas. This creates difficulty in forming long-term social connections, which may impact their mental health. However, participation in extracurricular activities may buffer the impact of stressors experienced by military students.

Objectives: The current study aimed to investigate the impact of participation in extracurricular activities on their mental well-being and to explore the role of social support as a mediator.

Methods: A quantitative cross-sectional study design using a mediation model was used, in which 100 military-connected youth from different educational institutes participated. The questionnaire comprised a demographic sheet and three pre-validated tools, i.e., the Extra-curricular Activity Involvement Scale, Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale, and the Social Provisions Scale. SPSS was used to analyze the responses using descriptive statistics, linear regression, mediation analysis, and analysis of variance ($p \leq 0.05$).

Results: Sixty-one percent of the participants were males, and 38% were 19-20 years old. The mean relocation frequency was 5.45 ± 2.89 times, and the educational institutes were changed 4.24 ± 2.78 times. The breadth and intensity of extracurricular activities involvement positively predicted mental well-being, with $F(1, 98) = 4.26$, $p = .042$, $R^2 = .04$, and $F(1, 98) = 5.93$, $p = .017$, $R^2 = .06$, respectively. Social support also significantly predicted mental well-being with $F(1, 98) = 42.94$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .31$. However, social support did not mediate the relationship ($p > .05$). In addition, there were significant mean differences in breadth of extracurricular activity involvement ($p = .020$), mental well-being ($p = .013$), and social support ($p = .010$) based on the age of the military-connected youth.

Conclusion: These findings reflect that parents and educational institutions should engage the relocated military-connected students in more extracurricular activities and should not ignore them so that they can easily adjust to the new surroundings and have a positive impact on their mental well-being.

Keywords: Extracurricular Activities, Well-Being, Social Support, Military-Connected Youth, Military Families, Mental Well-Being

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1. INTRODUCTION

A military child is defined as a person whose parent or caregiver serves in the regular military, either on a full-time basis or as a reservist, or has done so at any point during the child's first 25 years. These children face numerous challenges in school [1] and different stressors due to relocating frequently at this age. This includes frequent and prolonged absences of serving parent(s) due to deployment or training, the inherent risk involved in parents' injury or death, and numerous geographical relocations. This separates and disconnects them from their peers, teachers, and others while interrupting their education. It can also have a major impact on the psychological health and well-being of these adolescents. Youth belonging to military families are found to have feelings of hopelessness, lower satisfaction with life, and frequent involvement in risk-taking behaviors that are overt in nature [2].

Therefore, participating in extracurricular activities (ECA) other than academic activities may help them engage with people, utilize their free time after school, prevent behavioral problems, and have a positive influence on their well-being [3]. ECA includes, but is not limited to, athletics, academic clubs, content or creative writing, fine arts, sports, debates, dance, acting, voluntary services, etc. There are numerous educational, physical, and social activities to choose from and participate. These can be individual or team-based activities. Individual activities include participating in individual sports, debates, joining a club for self-defense, doing charity work, etc. On the other hand, team-based activities include joining a cricket or football team to reflect teamwork. So, children or adolescents have multiple options of available activities [4].

Engagement in ECA has numerous mental health benefits. It has been shown to reduce psychological issues like depression and anxiety in people and reduce negative thoughts. This leads to optimistic thinking and greater satisfaction with life, due to which children and adolescents can fully enjoy their lives. This improves overall mental well-being [5], which is vital to outperform academically, grow personally, and develop social relationships [6]. Extracurricular activities equip students by providing opportunities to learn crucial aspects of life such as leadership, team cohesion, and problem-solving skills. This increases the belief in oneself (self-efficacy), which can help to cope with the difficulties of life [7]. Furthermore, engagement in sports or other activities, particularly the arts, helps with reflection, emotional regulation, and expression, which reduces stress and anxiety [8]. Coping strategies represent another reason to participate in extracurricular activities. Through involvement in satisfying activities, students learn to manage stress in a constructive manner [9].

Research has demonstrated a significant connection between social support and mental health [10]. Support and encouragement play a significant role in extracurricular activities involvement. This scenario is particularly important for youth belonging to military families to develop adaptable social networks that could influence the sense of belongingness among youth [11].

The help people get from their interpersonal connections and social interactions is referred to as social support [12]. Sources of social support include parents and family, relatives, classmates, and teachers, and support from each source is linked to positive outcomes. This support can be emotional, practical, financial, or informational [13]. Youth who lack social support indulge in risky behaviors like smoking, alcohol intake, unhealthy food choices, and elevated aggression [14], in addition to psychological problems. It is crucial to explore the link between these factors, as they can have a long-term negative or positive impact on the future of children or adolescents [15].

Involvement in ECA forms supportive connections with people that are crucial for mental health. Students who take part in sports activities or join clubs generally claim to have more social networks, friends, and belongings [16]. People around such youth participants respect and encourage them. This gesture or response is sufficient to satisfy the requirement of a person's need for psychological and emotional support [17]. Likewise, it is observed that students in high school who engage in team-based sports perceive their fellow members as helpful and supportive, which has a favorable influence on their mental well-being [18]. This is one reason why it is important to assess the impact of social support and participation in ECA on the mental well-being of military-connected youth.

A phenomenological study investigated how high school students with serving military parents cope with frequent school changes and varying school environments due to constant relocations. Nine main themes were extracted based on interviews. These included the challenges of being a newcomer, parting ways with friends, and a lack of institutional awareness. Themes such as global exposure, adaptability, familial support, and acceptance of emerging opportunities underscored growth and adjustment. Participation in extracurricular activities and maintaining connections further facilitated building relationships and continuity. Overall, irrespective of losses and a lack of public comprehension, military students exhibited resilience and flexibility [19].

Mmari et al. [20] concluded that when military children engage in sports at their new institute, they frequently faced discrimination. Athletic coaches were hesitant to include military students in sports teams or give them starting positions due to concerns that it could disturb the overall dynamics of the team. Military students faced difficulties in establishing a

connection with their new fellow players, especially if their new position caused an existing teammate to lose a starting position.

A study in Canada investigated the mental health of adolescents aged 11-15 years from a military background. It was revealed that in comparison to non-military adolescents, military adolescents reported higher issues of mental health. This difference was particularly common in youths with low levels of peer or social support [21].

Oberle et al. [22] concluded that involvement in extracurricular activities was related to optimism, higher life satisfaction, and reduced depression and anxiety. Mental health and well-being were higher in both boys and girls who took part in extracurricular activities and had recreational screen time of fewer than two hours per day. A systematic review concluded that engaging in team sports, school clubs, and other extracurricular as well as community non-sport and sport activities can positively affect the mental health of the youth [23]. Linde [24] concluded that the interlink between ECA and well-being was partially or fully mediated by social support. Gender and age were also found to be moderators.

A qualitative study reported that the primary stressor for military children was the difficulty of establishing and sustaining strong friendships during transitions between schools. Several students reported that the unavoidable end of close companionships caused them to avoid forming any further strong relationships with classmates at new educational institutions. Many students opt for superficial connections to shield themselves from unavoidable sorrow rather than forming deep and meaningful friendships. With this type of relationship, it is more challenging to be accepted by social networks and established groups. Consequently, military students frequently experience a lack of social connection at their new institutions, which may result in difficulties adjusting to the new surroundings [25].

Another study highlighted that military-associated students had a higher level of depression and suicidal thoughts compared to their civilian counterparts. Deployment was found to be a significant predictor of well-being issues. However, supportive relationships contributed to overall improvement in well-being [26].

A study assessed middle and high school dependents of U.S. military personnel stationed at a German Airbase, particularly those engaged in extracurricular activities. The study emphasized the significance of organized activities and youth clubs in facilitating transitions. Such initiatives establish secure environments for social engagement, cultural adaptation, and spiritual growth. Such programs can be considered significant sources of social support, which provide a beneficial effect on youth's mental health by fostering resilience and well-being [27].

2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the present study are formulated as follows:

- 1 To investigate the factors predicting mental well-being in youth belonging to military families.
- 2 To assess the role of social support as a mediator between participation in extracurricular activities and mental well-being.
- 3 To explore age-based differences in extracurricular activity involvement, mental well-being, and social support of military-connected youth.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

A quantitative cross-sectional study design based on the mediation model was used to explore the impact of participation in extracurricular activities on the mental well-being of youth from military families and investigate the mediating role of social support.

3.2 Settings/Place

Participants were approached, and data were collected from different educational institutions of Pakistan, including schools, colleges, and universities.

3.3 Sample Size

One hundred youth participants aged between 11 and 20 years and belonging to military families were recruited.

3.4 Sampling Technique

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to recruit youth of military families.

3.5 Study Tools

Data were collected from youth belonging to military families through a self-administered questionnaire comprising a

demographic sheet and three pre-validated tools. The demographic sheet included questions like gender, age, number of family members and siblings, parent served/is serving in the military, number of times relocated to a different neighborhood or city, number of educational institutes changed, source of social support, etc. Other than the demographic sheet, the following validated tools were used:

3.5.1 Extra-curricular Activity Involvement Scale

The extracurricular activity involvement (EAI) is a self-reported tool to measure the intensity of involvement of youth (weekly hours) in extracurricular activities and the breadth of participation (number of activity types). It includes items regarding the weekly involvement of youth in different kinds of extracurricular activities, with six response options from not at all to ten or more hours. Moreover, the youth are asked about the total number of hours per week they get involved in extracurricular activities, including those in the educational institute or the community. Also, the time spent per week in a job after studies for pay is inquired. These statements have six response categories, from none to twenty hours or more [28].

3.5.2 Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)

The WEMWBS comprises 14 items to assess the respondents' mental well-being, including psychological functioning and subjective well-being. All the items in the tool are positively worded. It is based on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being none of the time and 5 being all of the time. The total score on this scale ranges from 14 to 70. The reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.89 on a student sample and 0.91 on a population sample, which means the tool has high internal consistency [29].

3.5.3 Social Provisions Scale

The Social Provisions Scale measures individuals' perception of their social relationships to provide different aspects of social support, including the opportunities to provide social support. It comprises 24 items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It includes six subscales, i.e., reliable alliance, nurturance, attachment, social integration, guidance, and reassurance of worth. Each subscale consists of four items: two are positively worded, while two require reverse coding. The Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was reported as 0.915 for the total scale and ranged from 0.653 to 0.760 for the subscales [30]. Researchers in another study reported the reliability coefficient of this scale to be 0.847, which shows that the scale has very good internal consistency [31].

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

Youth belonging to military families were approached. Individuals who agreed to participate signed a written consent form, which ensured anonymity, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of provided responses. After providing consent, the participants completed the questionnaires.

3.7 Data Analysis

After data collection and entry, it was coded and analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics, linear regression, mediation analysis, and analysis of variance ($p \leq 0.05$) were applied to analyze the data.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Table 1 : Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	61	61.00
Female	39	39.00
Age		
11-13 years	25	25.00
14-15 years	18	18.00
16-18 years	19	19.00
19-20 years	38	38.00
Academic Rating		
Average	31	31.00
Above average	42	42.00
High achiever	27	27.00
Military Parent		
Father	91	91.00

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Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Mother	4	4.00
Both	5	5.00
Relocation Frequency		
1-3	27	27.00
4-6	35	35.00
7-9	29	29.00
10-12	9	9.00
Educational Institutions Changed		
1-3	45	45.00
4-6	40	40.00
7-9	12	12.00
10-12	3	3.00
Source of Social Support		
Family	91	91.00
Relative	48	48.00
Teachers	43	43.00
Classmates	46	46.00
Friends	67	67.00

Note. *n* = 100 youth participants.

This table shows that almost three-fifths of the participants were males. Nearly forty percent of the participants (*n* = 38) were aged between 19 and 20 years, and 25% were aged between 11-13 years. Forty-two percent of the participants scored above average academically. More than ninety percent of the participants had their father in military services. One-third of the participants (*n* = 35) have relocated 4 to 6 times in their lives, and 29% have relocated 7 to 9 times. Forty-five percent of the youth participants have changed 1-3 educational institutes. Majority of the youth participants belonging to military families have social support from family, and two-thirds have it from friends (Table 1).

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Indicators	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Family members	4.89	1.15
Siblings	2.55	1.51
Relocation frequency	5.45	2.89
Change of educational institutes	4.24	2.78
Breadth of extracurricular activities	5.87	2.95
Intensity of extracurricular activities	1.53	.95
Mental Well-being Total	51.58	11.97
Guidance	12.55	2.20
Reassurance of Worth	12.26	2.05
Social Integration	12.45	1.95
Attachment	11.66	1.81
Nurturance	11.45	2.03
Reliable Alliance	12.47	2.13
Social Provisions Scale Total	72.84	10.10

Table 2 shows that the youth participants had an average of 4.89 ± 1.15 family members, with the mean number of siblings being 2.55 ± 1.51 . On average, the participants have relocated 5.45 times and have changed their educational institutes 4.24 times. The respondents take part in an average of 5.87 ± 2.95 extracurricular activities. The mean scores of mental well-being were reported as 51.58 ± 11.97 , and the mean score of social support was 72.84 ± 10.10 . A detailed description is given.

4.3 Extracurricular Activities, Social Support and Mental Well-being

Table 3 : Regression Coefficients of Breadth of EAI on Mental Well-being

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Constant	46.71	2.64		17.72	<.001	[41.48, 51.95]
Breadth of EAI	.83	.40	.20	2.06	.042*	[-.03, 1.63]

R^2	.04
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Note. * $p \leq .05$.

A simple linear regression was conducted to assess the impact of EAI breadth on mental well-being (Table 3). The overall model was statistically significant, with $F(1, 98) = 4.26, p = .042$. The R^2 value of .04 indicated that the predictor variable (breadth of EAI) explained only 4% of the variance in the outcome variable (mental well-being). Moreover, the findings revealed that the EAI breadth positively predicted mental well-being ($B = .20, p = .042$).

Table 4 : Regression Coefficients of Intensity of EAI on Mental Well-being

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Constant	46.96	2.23		21.09	<.001	[42.54, 51.38]
Intensity of EAI	3.02	1.24	.24	2.44	.017*	[-.56, 5.48]
R^2	.06					

A simple linear regression was conducted to assess the impact of EAI intensity on mental well-being (Table 4). The overall model was statistically significant, with $F(1, 98) = 5.93, p = .017$. The R^2 value of .06 indicated that the predictor variable (EAI intensity) explained only 6% variance in the outcome variable (mental well-being). Moreover, the findings revealed that the EAI intensity positively predicted mental well-being ($B = .24, p = .017$).

Table 5 : Regression Coefficients of Social Support on Mental Well-being

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Constant	3.90	7.35		.53	.596	[-10.67, 18.48]
Social Support	.66	.10	.55	6.55	<.001***	[-.46, .85]
R^2	.31					

Note. *** $p \leq .001$.

A simple linear regression was conducted to assess the impact of social support on mental well-being (Table 5). The overall model was statistically significant, with $F(1, 98) = 42.94, p < .001$. The R^2 value of .31 indicated that the predictor variable (social support) explained 31% of the variance in the outcome variable (mental well-being). The findings revealed that social support positively predicted mental well-being ($B = .55, p < .001$).

Table 6: Mediation Effects of Social Support between Extracurricular Activity Involvement (Breadth) and Mental Well-being

Path	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
a: EAI (Breadth) → SS	-.10	.35	.778	-.78, .59
b: SS → MWB (controlling for EAI Breadth)	.66	.10	<.001***	.47, .85
c: EAI (Breadth) → MWB (Total effect)	.83	.40	.042*	.03, 1.63
c': EAI (Breadth) → MWB (controlling for SS, Direct effect)	.89	.33	<.01**	.24, 1.55
Indirect Effect (a*b)	-.07	.25	-	-.62, .38

Note. EAI = Extracurricular Activities Involvement, SS = Social Support, MWB = Mental Well-being. ** $p \leq .01$.

The results of mediation analysis showed that extracurricular activities involvement (Breadth) did not predict social support (*a* path), $B = -0.10, SE = 0.35, p = .778$. In contrast, social support significantly predicted mental well-being (*b* path), $B = 0.66, SE = 0.10, p < .001$. The total effect of breadth of extracurricular activity involvement on mental well-being was significant (*c* path), $B = 0.83, SE = 0.40, p = .042$, and the direct effect (*c'* path) also remained significant even after accounting for social support, $B = 0.89, SE = 0.33, p = .008$. However, the indirect effect of extracurricular activity involvement breadth on mental well-being via social support was non-significant ($B = -0.07, SE = 0.25, [CI = -0.62, 0.38]$), as the confidence interval included zero, indicating the absence of mediation. The results suggest that social support did not explain the relationship between the breadth of extracurricular activity involvement and mental well-being. The significant direct effect indicates that the breadth of extracurricular activity participation independently predicts mental well-being, but not through social support (Table 6).

Table 7 : Mediation Effects of Social Support between Extracurricular Activity Involvement (Intensity) and Mental Well-being

Path	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
a: EAI (Intensity) → SS	2.07	1.06	.052	-.02, 4.17
b: SS → MWB (controlling for EAI Intensity)	.62	.10	<.001***	.42, .82
c: EAI (Intensity) → MWB (Total effect)	3.02	1.24	.017*	.56, 5.48
c': EAI (Intensity) → MWB (controlling for SS, Direct effect)	1.72	1.08	.112	-.41, 3.86
Indirect Effect (a*b)	1.29	.69	-	.19, 2.90

The results of the mediation analysis showed that the intensity of extracurricular activities involvement did not significantly predict social support (*a* path), $B = 2.07$, $SE = 1.06$, $p = .052$. However, social support significantly predicted mental well-being (path *b*), $B = 0.62$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .001$. The total effect of extracurricular activity intensity on mental well-being was also significant (*c* path), $B = 3.02$, $SE = 1.24$, $p = .017$. Yet the direct effect, after controlling for social support, was no longer significant, $B = 1.72$, $SE = 1.08$, $p = .112$. The indirect effect (*c'* path) through social support was significant ($B = 1.29$, $SE = 0.69$, $[0.19, 2.90]$), as the confidence interval did not include zero. These findings indicate that although the confidence interval for the indirect effect of extracurricular activities on mental well-being via social support did not include zero (0.19, 2.90), the non-significant path between extracurricular activity intensity and social support ($p = .052$) suggests that the mediation is not statistically supported (Table 7).

Table 8: One-Way ANOVA showing EAI, mental well-being, and social support across the Age of Youth

Variables	11-13 years		14-15 years		16-18 years		19-20 years		<i>F</i> (3, 96)	<i>p</i>	η^2	Post-Hoc
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Breadth of EAI	5.64	2.52	4.78	1.96	5.00	2.98	6.97	3.28	3.44	.020*	.10	4>2
Intensity of EAI	1.64	.64	1.83	.38	1.47	1.07	1.34	1.19	1.26	.294	.04	-
Mental Well-being	57.16	10.53	51.83	14.59	45.47	9.68	50.84	11.29	3.81	.013*	.11	1>3
Social Support	76.96	10.56	76.00	10.26	68.42	7.11	70.84	9.85	4.02	.010**	.11	1>3

Note. η^2 : small effect = .01 to .059 and medium effect = .06 to .139

Table 8 shows the differences in EAI, mental well-being, and social support among youth belonging to military families based on their age. The results indicated non-significant mean differences in intensity of EAI with small effect size ($p > .05$). However, there were significant mean differences in breadth of EAI ($F(3, 96) = 3.44$, $p = .020$), mental well-being ($F(3, 96) = 3.81$, $p = .013$), and social support ($F(3, 96) = 4.02$, $p = .010$) based on age of the military-related youth, indicating a medium effect size. The findings revealed that youth aged 19-20 years participated in a greater number of extracurricular activities compared to youth aged 14-15 years. Moreover, participants aged 11-13 years had higher mental well-being and social support compared to those of 16-18 years of age.

5. DISCUSSION

Youth from military families experience relocations due to parental deployments. These changes and disruptions in lifestyle, living, and educational environments create stressors and increase vulnerability to mental well-being issues and emotional health concerns. Involvement in extracurricular activities may act as a protective factor against these concerns. This study aimed to investigate the effect of participation in extracurricular activities on the mental well-being of youth from military families. Moreover, the role of social support as a mediator between EAI and mental well-being was also analyzed among sixty-one males and thirty-nine females. More than half of these participants were between the ages of sixteen to twenty years. Ninety-four percent of participants had military-serving fathers.

Moreover, it was seen that the average rate of relocations reported by the participants was around five times. These findings are in congruence with previous research [32]. Similarly, with respect to the average rate of relocations, military-connected youth reported an average of four times change in educational institutions. These findings align with the Higgins Neyland et al. [33] work on adolescents from the military.

Furthermore, involvement in a variety of extracurricular activities was also explored. The results suggested that students

participated in an average of five to six activities. Hanks [28] reported nearly the same results. He stated that high school students participate in three to four extracurricular activities. The well-being scores of participants were also found to be above average. A study on military youth reported interesting findings regarding the well-being of participants. According to the results of this study, almost thirty percent of the participants reported lower well-being, showing that seventy percent of the military youth reported better well-being [2].

Similarly, adolescents also reported above-average social support. These findings align with previous research conducted on youth from military families. The findings of this research also showed above-average scores of military-connected youth from eleven to eighteen years old on support from family and family as a mode of coping [34].

The present study revealed that involvement in extracurricular activities, both in terms of breadth and intensity, positively predicted the mental well-being of military-associated youth. These findings provide evidence that participation and involvement in extracurricular activities act as a protective factor against all potential risk factors for military-connected youth, given the presence of multiple stressors in their life. In addition, research shows that involvement in extracurricular activities reduces the risk of emotional disorders, particularly in teens. These activities provide opportunities for social engagement and developing emotional connections with educational institutes and school fellows, which in turn promotes positive development of youth and reduces adverse mental health outcomes. This happens because adolescents invest time in healthy activities that channel their energy and emotions into productive activities. They can choose from various options, including sports, arts, academic, and skill-based activities, which are offered in a supervised environment to help adolescents explore their interests and inclinations [35]. Participation in these activities is also found to promote a sense of optimism and higher life satisfaction among students [5].

Moreover, students who engage more in extracurricular activities have less energy and time to invest in risk-taking behaviours. Similarly, it leads to parent-child interactions and relations that are positive and reduces externalizing behaviours and conduct-related issues [36].

It was also concluded that social support positively predicted the mental well-being of youth. This shows that greater social support leads to better mental health among youth from military families. Youth from military families experience multiple stressors. These stressors include the absence of a serving parent, fear of serving parents' security, dreading that the parent may get injured or die, insecurity regarding their own safety, fear of deployment leaving behind home, friends, and social circle, insecurity of struggling to go through the adjustment phase again, disrupted education, and many other relevant stressors [37]. This highlights the importance of strong and adaptive family connections and support in the lives of youth belonging to military families. This is because these networks promote a sense of support and belonging [38].

In stressful times, seeking support from sources such as family, friends, or the elderly, like grandparents, is considered a gesture of connectivity. This also shows an individual's natural effort to cope with the situation. This support from family protects individuals from experiencing stress and its adverse effects, which could be numerous, particularly for youth, including conduct problems and even anti-social behaviours. This also highlights the importance of solid familial support for military children and youth, as the peer groups of these age groups change frequently due to constant relocations [39]. Social support was tested as a mediator between the relationship of EAI and mental well-being. The results were found to be non-significant. This could potentially be because military children are well aware that they may have to experience relocation. Therefore, they avoid participating in a lot of team activities and building strong connections, which may become harder for them to leave behind, and may use emotional detachment as a mechanism of coping [40]. Research also shows that when military children experience deployment or relocation, it reduces engagement at school [41].

It is also reported in the literature that there is a reduction in social support to military-connected youth due to relocations and parental deployment, which reduces the level of engagement at school. This is clear that these individuals experience such life changes that may disturb the connections they have built with their peers as they have to leave behind their peers, teachers, and mentors. These connections, although present, are for shorter periods of time [41].

In addition, the activities these military children are more likely to participate in may be of an individual nature, such as arts (painting/calligraphy), music (learning to play an instrument), or any sports that are done at a personal level, like swimming or horse riding. So, the nature of these activities may limit the effect of social support generally required in surplus amounts in other group-level activities and sports [42].

Moreover, it was concluded that significant mean differences exist in the variety of extracurricular activities participants are involved in (breadth), their mental health, and social support based on their age. Youth aged nineteen to twenty years participated in a greater number of extracurricular activities than younger participants. This could be potentially because they may have navigated the more challenging time of adolescence and are comparatively better in control of themselves, allowing them to decide where to invest their time. They may sign up for self-fulfilling activities, being more independent

in their decision-making in comparison to younger age categories, who are usually dependent on parents and caregivers. Researchers have reported that adolescents may not be encouraged to take part in extracurricular activities due to the absence of a service parent because of training or deployment. The caregiver or at-home parent may have increased responsibilities that may stop younger adolescents from promoting participation in extracurricular activities, as this requires investing extra time, training, and managing other relevant things, like supervision at the time of participation, staying beyond school hours, and arranging required transportation for extracurricular activity involvement [43].

Younger adolescents (11-13 years) from military families were found to have better mental well-being and social support. These findings contrast with previous research, which found that the social support, well-being, and life satisfaction of younger children were lower [2]. These findings could potentially occur because younger children may be unable to fully understand the complete phenomenon of relocating, adjusting, and adapting to a new life after relocation. As older participants (19-20 years) have frequently relocated, their repeated mobility may have led to experiencing hindrances in keeping up with old fellows, having stable relations with peers, and extended mental health concerns. Another possibility is that parents, given the relation and related settlements, may remain unable to give proper attention to their child, due to which the problems may prevail [25]. Research has recorded that when children and adolescents are in a familiar environment and experience support and visibility from their social group, particularly their peers, they sense a stronger connection with their institutions [44]. It is important to note that a majority of research is conducted on comparing military and civilian children, which limits the pool of relevant data regarding demographic-based differences in military youth.

6. LIMITATIONS

Given the cultural factors, the majority of the military-serving parents were males. This reflects the traditional family model and norms, showing a particular kind of influence of at-home parents' gender on the upbringing of the military children. This could potentially limit the generalizability of the findings. Regarding parental work status, there is a lack of demographic segments, including military-serving mothers and both military-serving parents. The absence of data regarding the deployment status of the military-serving parent may have impacted the study outcomes. A methodological limitation, like the cross-sectional nature of the study, may have limited the researcher's ability to draw causal relationships among the variables and generate in-depth conclusions about the participants' experiences and overtime adjustments.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, EAI positively impacts the mental well-being of military-associated youth. Social support also positively predicted mental well-being. However, social support did not mediate the relationship between EAI and the mental well-being of military-associated youth.

These findings highlight the importance of youth engagement in non-academic activities. Therefore, parents and educational institutions should engage relocated military-connected youth in more extracurricular activities without ignoring their impact on the lives of this population so that they can adjust to new surroundings and new culture, and therefore can have a positive impact on their well-being and lower adjustment issues.

The importance of social support is also visible from these findings. Parental support can enhance the coping abilities of military-connected youth by reducing the impact of challenging experiences of parental deployments and frequent relocations. Strong support systems in terms of family, friends, teachers, or mentors can promote resilience during stressful times and mitigate feelings of distress.

Psychologists and therapists can offer guidance regarding how participation in arts, sports, voluntary service, or clubs can improve mental health. The results can help provide tailored solutions and support methods to increase resilience and make adjustments by understanding the influence of ECA and social networks to overcome the stressful situation and instability associated with military families. The findings of the current study could also be beneficial for educational institutes, as they can make decisions about better inclusion of military-associated students in curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. Working on both ECA and social support can help design comprehensive strategies that can bring continuous long-term improvements in the well-being of military-connected adolescents.

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