



National
Military Family
Association

BLOOM
EMPOWERING THE MILITARY TEEN



2023 Military Teen Experience Survey: Peer Connections

The Importance of Peer Connections

Peer connection, also known as peer support, is a broad construct involving friendships and social connectedness and relationships with peers. During adolescence, teens begin to rely less on their parents and turn more to their peers for support. Strong, positive peer relationships are integral to positive experiences in adolescence. Peer support has long been found to be a [protective](#) factor in adolescence. Supportive friendships can [lower](#) the risk of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, as well as limit the negative impact of these factors. Peer connections also help foster self-esteem, optimism, and mental well-being.

Close friendships are important for the development of identity and a unique sense of self. The positive influence of long-lasting close friendships in adolescence persist into young [adulthood](#). Young adults who maintain friendships from their adolescence report lower levels of depression and higher levels of self-worth.

The Impact of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented levels of social isolation, and teens and young adults were most impacted. School closures, online learning, and the cancellation of sports and extracurriculars interrupted the social lives of many young people. Even with social media, teens and young adults reported [higher](#) rates of loneliness than ever before. However, teens that were able to maintain social connection during the pandemic were [less](#) depressed than their more isolated peers. Peer connection is even more important in the context of a pandemic, and as we've now passed the three-year mark since the initial lockdowns, it's important to assess the peer connections of our military youth.



The Impact of Military Life

Some aspects of the military lifestyle, such as PCS and frequent moves, can make it difficult to form and maintain close friendships. Leaving friends behind and having to make new friends is a big [stressor](#) among military youth. Our respondents reported an average of 4 PCS/moves and an average of 5 school changes due to military moves. While these moves can make it difficult to make and keep friends, in some ways, the military lifestyle can promote being social and outgoing, which can help with the formation of friendships and foster peer connection.

What We Asked

Because of the importance of peer connections to well-being, we wanted to see how our military teens felt about their friendships and ability to make friends. Two items were selected from a [study](#) of adolescent development. The questions were:

"How many of the friends you spend the most of your time with make you feel good about yourself?"

"How good are you at making and keeping friends?"

What We Found

We found that most (77%) respondents felt that their friends made them feel good about themselves, and that the overwhelming majority (90%) of respondents were confident in their ability to make and keep friends.

Overall, most respondents reported strong peer connections.

There do not appear to be any significant differences in peer connections between boys and girls, although girls may have slightly more friends that make them feel good about themselves than boys. There do not appear to be any significant differences between girls and boys in how good they are at making and keeping friends.

Peer Connections and Mental Well-being

For the most part, respondents with more positive friendships reported better mental well-being than those with fewer positive friendships.

Additionally, respondents who were more confident in their friendship abilities reported better mental well-being than those who were less confident. While it is evident that peer connection is related to mental well-being, we cannot speculate about the causality of these relationships.

Connecting with Other Military Teens

Because of the unique challenges of military life, it's important for military youth to connect with each other. Military teens can relate to each other due to shared experiences. Our military teens were asked which online platforms they used to connect with their peers.

The top platform for connecting with other military teens was Twitter, followed by Facebook and Instagram.

Ranking Social Media



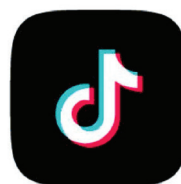
746



716



657



459



454



391



289



252



183



155

Recommendations for Fostering Better Peer Connections

While Family Science researchers, Family Policy experts, and the DoD acknowledge military-connected challenges will always exist for the military teen population, there are programs to support this population. NMFA has designed programming solutions to respond to those challenges. Following the 2022 study, NMFA built on our successful models for Operation Purple® camps and family programs to create tailored experiences to support teen mental and physical wellness. Additionally, BLOOM is now an NMFA program, and together we are able to continue elevating military teens voices while ensuring the connections BLOOM fosters continue to thrive.





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