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STØT  
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# SSOP Annual Camp | 2019

Narrative Evaluation

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Støt Soldater & Pårørende (SSOP) is a Danish charity working with veterans and their families. SSOP provide financial support to aid access to professional help such as rehabilitation, psychological consultation, homework help, or physical aids. Funding for this support comes from membership to SSOP (open to everyone), fundraising and contributions from individuals, organizations and foundations.

Since 2015, SSOP has held annual camps to support the emotional health and well-being of children and young people from veteran families. The camp takes place every year over five days during August. In the spring of 2018, SSOP held the first camp for parents. The purpose of the parent camp is to educate parents on the personal development of their children participating in SSOP's annual camps.

SSOP also offers coaching for families as well as individual targeted help for children and young people in veteran families, such as: family counselling, psychological counselling and therapy, mentors ('bigger brother' or 'bigger sister'), education counselling, bridge building to the public services and mediation with schools.

*"The purpose of all measures is to help children and young people from veteran families and their families build up resilience in relation to the stress that may be associated with being a veteran family or a family where the mother or father is regularly deployed."*



The coaches and research team at SSOP Annual camp, August 2019: Luna, Lars, Birgitte, Paul, Alison, Bente, Vinnie, Cecillie, Lisbeth, Svend-Erik, Julie, Sannie, Morten, Thomas, Lone, Christine, Nicky and Michael (not pictured)



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The research team are based in the Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research at Northumbria University in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. The Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research are a multi-disciplinary team of academics, peer researchers and PhD students conducting translational research in the Armed Forces Community.

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## **Acknowledgments**



The research team would like to acknowledge The Baton. The Baton is an English charity with the primary mission to raise and maintain awareness within society regarding the reality of life for service personnel and their families and to promote support. The Baton was the catalyst for connecting the Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families Research with SSOP. More information about The Baton can be found at [www.thebaton.co.uk](http://www.thebaton.co.uk)

## Introduction

Depending on the social and political landscape of the country, children and young people from military families are often portrayed as a stereotyped group, rather than a multi-layered complex and heterogeneous population (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Many children who are born within the military environment do not realise there are potential differences associated with being a military child versus being a civilian child. The strict, organisational discipline may not seem appealing to the civilian population but, to military children, young people and their families, this is all they know. Cozza and Lerner (2013) argue, children of a serving military person are associated within a unique subculture and cultural identity.

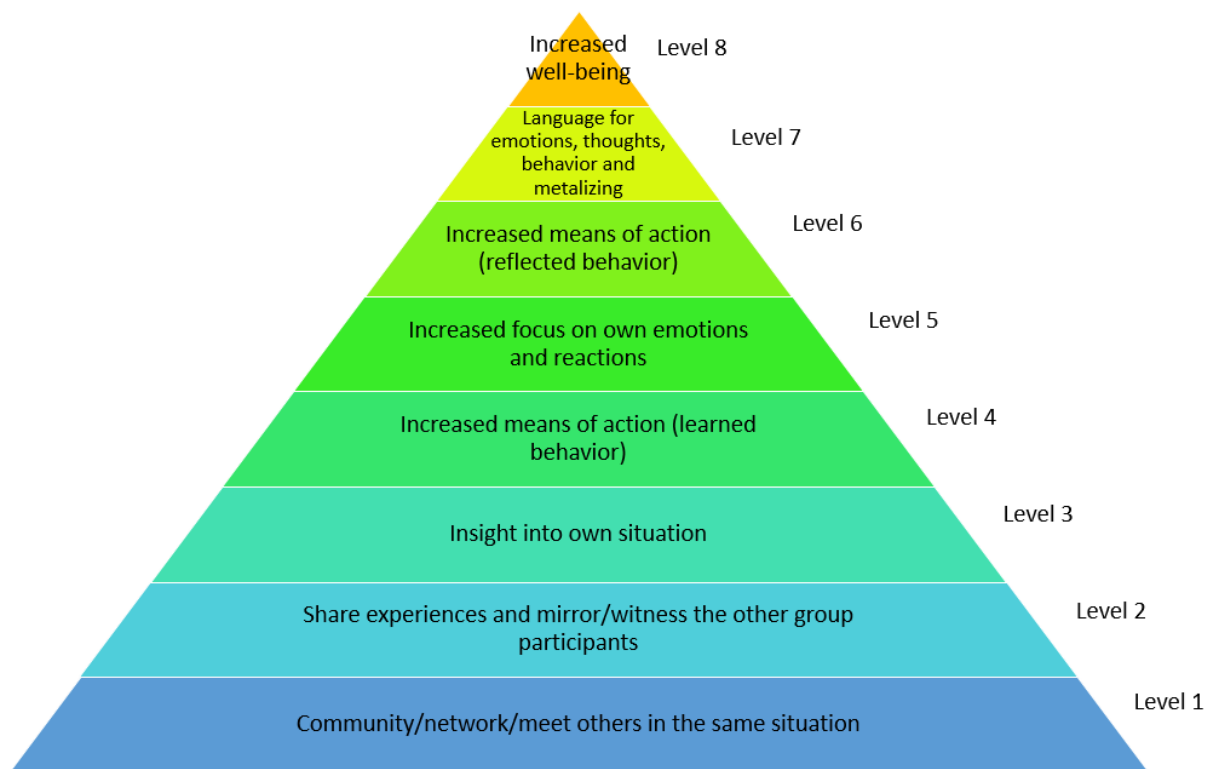
Additionally, military children are exposed to a range of stressors that are rarely experienced by their civilian counterparts (White et al., 2011). In particular, repeated and often extended periods of separation from a parent serving in the military. Multiple and prolonged separation exposes children to cumulative stress of repeated absence and re-entry into the family (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011). Although military life can have a negative effect on families, the majority of families have positive experiences (O'Neil, 2013). The effect of military life and the subsequent transition from the military may cause emotional turbulence for children and young people (Cozza et al., 2013).

Mental health problems such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, substance use, suicidal ideation and domestic violence (Bello-Utu et al., 2015; McFarlane, 2009) have been associated with military combat deployments, especially deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan (Tanielian et al., 2008). Research has highlighted the potential life limiting effects living with a parent with mental health issues or PTSD can have on children and young people's health, well-being and academic attainment (Cozza, et al., 2013, Dearden & Becker, 2005). The majority of research on military children and young people has been based on those from the US. There appears to be minimal research specifically considering the experiences of military children and young people in Denmark.

In 2018, the Danish research institute VIVE (The National Research and Analysis Centre for Welfare) administered a survey to children from veteran families (Rayce et al., 2019). Findings indicated poorer well-being among children with a parent suffering from poor mental health. These children were also more likely to be raised in families who were separated or going through divorce, to feel isolated and at times stigmatised in schools.

SSOP measures the impact of their camps using a Success Pyramid (adapted from Dahler-Larsen & Krogstrup, 2003, see Figure 1). This pyramid was initially established by The Danish Veteran Centre to evaluate their children groups and has been guided by the Danish

Psychiatrist Fund. The Success Pyramid illustrates eight levels, representing the impact a psychosocial intervention such as the SSOP annual camp may have. On the Success Pyramid, level 1 is the lowest degree of impact, providing a community network where the young people can meet others like themselves. The next impact levels focus on the value of sharing experiences, mirroring their own story in the stories told by others and, increasing insight into their own situation and coping strategies. Level 4 to 6 consider new learned behaviours, increased self-awareness and an ability to reflect on their own situation and behaviours. Finally, levels 7 to 8 demonstrate a new language for emotions, thoughts, behaviours and to increase the overall emotional and mental well-being of the young person.



**Figure 1.** The Success Pyramid

The overall design of the camp is based on the principles of group therapy for children as described by Nordenhof and Eide (2014). During the camps, the children and young people’s own narratives are mixed with learning games, creative activities and other team-based activities that make it easier for them to share challenges and problems, whilst at the same time strengthening their self-esteem.

It is vital to understand how SSOP’s annual camps impact the emotional well-being of children and young people from veteran families. Acknowledging a current gap in research on the experiences of Danish military families, the research team will first consider the experience of growing up as a military child in Denmark. This will set the scene for the subsequent evaluation of SSOP’s annual camp, where mixed methods will be utilised.

## Method

### Aims

To understand the experiences of children and young people from veteran families and to critically evaluate the impact of SSOP's annual camp on the emotional well-being, decision making, confidence, resilience and self-esteem of participants attending. The use of Success Pyramid as a measurement tool will also be considered.

### Design

A mixed methods design was utilised to explore the impact of being a military child in Denmark and to evaluate SSOP's annual camp. Focussing on the emotional health of military young people, a quantitative measure was administered to determine mental well-being at the beginning of the camp (baseline) and again at the end of the week (post-camp). Ten individual semi-structured interviews and two focus groups were also carried out to further explore and understand young people's experiences of growing up in a military family and of SSOP's annual camp.

### Participants

Forty-eight young people from Denmark were registered to attend SSOP's annual camp, 45 attended. As the week progressed, four young people left for a variety of reasons (including homesickness), therefore 41 young people completed the full week.

Of those who attended the camp, the 41 who remained for the full week, completed a mental well-being measure at baseline and post-camp. The participants were aged between 11 and 19 (mean = 13.34, SD = 2.07), 26 were female (63.4%) and 15 were male (36.6%). Ten participants also took part in a semi-structured interview and one of two focus groups. These participants were aged between 12 and 19 (mean = 15.00, SD = 2.54), six were female and four were male.

### Data Collection

Quantitative and qualitative data collection took place during SSOP's annual camp from 5<sup>th</sup> August to 9<sup>th</sup> August 2019. Ethical approval was granted through Northumbria University's ethical approval system (Ref: 17425).

### Mental Well-Being Measure

To measure the mental well-being of participants, the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale, (WEMWBS – Tennant et al., 2006) was administered at baseline and post-camp to all participants in attendance (see Appendix A and B for scales). The WEMWBS is one of the few solely positive single scales for measuring mental well-being, which has been fully validated for use in this age group (Clarke et al., 2011). The WEMWBS is a 14-item scale



covering subjective well-being and psychological functioning, where all items are worded positively and address aspects of positive mental health. The participants were asked to score on a Likert scale how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Scores ranged from 1 to 5, where a score of 1 denoted a strong disagreement and a score of 5 a strong agreement. Scores were then collated to determine the overall well-being of the participant. Scores were categorised as low well-being, moderate well-being and high well-being as follows:

- Low well-being:  $x \leq 42$
- Moderate well-being:  $43 \leq x \leq 60$
- High well-being:  $\geq 61$

### Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups

Ten participants took part in a semi-structured interview to explore their experience of being a military child in Denmark (see Appendix C for interview schedule). Interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Two focus groups were held with the participants who took part in the semi-structured interviews; five in each group (see Appendix D for focus group schedule). The focus groups centred on the participants' experiences of attending SSOP's annual camp, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes.

All data collection took place with an interpreter to translate (if required) the questions and the narratives of the participants taking part. All interviews and focus groups were recorded to ensure robust data capture.

### Data Analysis

All quantitative data was entered into SPSS, where descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Tests were carried out. The Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test is a non-parametric test, used to compare two repeated measures on a single sample to assess if the findings differ. Non-parametric testing was utilised as the quantitative data collected was not normally distributed.

All qualitative data was entered into NVivo and analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of analysing textual data, where the researcher identifies common themes (topics, ideas and patterns) that appear repeatedly in transcripts. Qualitative data was analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up.

## Being a Military Child in Denmark: The Narrative Context

Participants discussed what being a child from a military family was like. These narratives shaped the context of why they attended SSOP's annual camp. During analysis, a number of themes emerged within the participants' narratives. These themes were military life and deployment, parental mental health due to deployment, young people's mental and emotional health and connectedness.

### Military Life and Deployment

Within the first theme, military life and deployment, participants discussed what it was like to grow up in a military family, how their military life compared to their civilian friends and, how they felt deployment had affected their lives. The majority of participants perceived their family life to be normal. However, there was an acknowledgment that there were certain experiences that made growing up in a military family hard.

*"It's like a normal family, but it's still very hard."*

*"Well, for me, it's been like that is how I grew up so for me there has been no difference, I don't know how it would be otherwise. So, for me it's like that's how I grew up."*

Whilst many of the participants explained that growing up within a military family was normal, a leading theme throughout all the narratives was the difficulties with deployment. In relation to this was a loss of connection participants felt to their serving parent and the implications this had on their everyday lives.

*"I miss him a lot. Something is missing at home, we have a big house, and when someone is missing it's like empty."*

*"It's difficult I would say because people don't really get how it is when your dad is going out [Conflict], they think oh he is coming back, but you never know, that's scary not to know if he is going to come back or not."*

The experience of deployment was different for each participant, dependant on the length and frequency of deployment. This presented multiple complications within the home environment and dynamics as a result of the health and well-being of the 'stay at-home' parent and the integration of the returning parent. Importantly, a number of the participants' parents had left the military before they were born, demonstrating the potential long-term effects of military deployment to a combat zone.

*"When I was younger at school he would run in and say hello to us and just have this wink in his eye and a happy disposition. He always smiled, but now he is like, he still comes into us, but that wink is not there. He is not smiling that much, and we have to kind of fight for it to get him to smile."*

As the previous quote identified, a number of participants recognised a change in presentation of their parents, some could still remember the parent they were before deployment. This recognition of parental change also had an impact on the dynamics within the family household and put extra pressure on other family members.

*“It’s stressed, my mum is the only one who is actually going to work. My dad has a job, but he is medically discharged.”*

These quotes demonstrate that deployment affects those still serving and those who have left the military. It is important to consider serving and non-serving families in terms of the short, medium and long-term effects military life can have on a family.

## Parental Mental Health

The narratives within the second theme demonstrate the effect of military life, especially deployment and the resulting impact of the serving parent’s mental health on the family. All but one participant had a parent with a mental health issue, described by the participants as PTSD resulting from combat deployment. Within this theme were the following sub-themes: presentation of father versus mother, conflict in families and domestic abuse.

### Presentation of Father versus Mother

The presentation of parental mental health and the relationship participants had with their parent appeared to differ between mother and father in the narratives. Interestingly, the participants perceived a better relationship with their mother, regardless of whether or not the mother presented with similar symptoms to the fathers with PTSD.

*“...dad has PTSD, and I have grown up with that. It was long before I was born, he got that diagnosis. There is a lot of conflicts at home deciding who is going to do what. My dad needs a lot of space he usually can’t get it as we have four in our family.”*

*“He has PTSD - It’s been hard at times. As I say it has its ups and downs and it’s definitely harder to live with him when he has his downs but yeah its, its hard you know, you have to be careful with what you say and what you doing and all of that and if he is asleep or anything you have to be quiet in the house so there is a lot of things you have to think about when he is doing stuff.”*

The above quotes indicate that many participants are living in homes which are potentially complex and anxiety provoking. Additionally, the way in which a mother’s mental health was discussed by participants, came across as more compassionate, describing the actual presentation of their poor mental health.

*“I just think my mum is sick. She has I don’t know how to say it in English, but PTSD...mum has anger issues it’s like an attack, anger yeah.”*

*“She is trying to keep it down and simple ...”*

Consistently, participants focussed less on the wider impact their mother’s poor mental health had on themselves or the rest of their family, providing a more descriptive reality. Participants, who had a veteran mother, did not talk in as much detail about their parent’s mental health as those with a veteran father. The narratives of the father and the relationship with the family had a greater focus on conflicts, and the anticipation of these, for example: walking on eggshells - trying to second-guess how their actions could affect the actions of their father, in an attempt to avoid additional conflict.

### Conflict in families

Within the narratives, there was a high presentation of conflict within the family. Participants highlighted that conflict was having a detrimental impact on their emotional and mental health, their relationships with other family members, their friends and the connection with their wider community.

*“I try to help my dad, but he keeps pushing help away. So, I feel I am doing wrong.”*

*“Sometimes it’s hard because we get angry at each other and sometimes we start to fight...you can’t say it’s easy because it’s not easy being in a family where people have a symptom [PTSD].”*

*“It’s making my whole family stressed. When my mum has to work and take care of all the things [Household] she never gets time alone and that affects us, me and my sister as she gets mad quickly and she is really stressed as she knows she has to work or we will have no money.”*

*“Yeah, I have just grown up with a dad who can’t do things like other dads can. Like play football in the yard, go to concerts, events. It’s harder for him, and sometimes he just needs space to be - It’s making my whole family stressed.”*

All but one participant described the complexities of family life post-deployment and the effects parental mental health had on the family dynamic. Observations of the data, highlighted high volumes of conflict in family relationships that went beyond the participants’ description of their civilian counterparts.

### Domestic Abuse

Whilst two participants mentioned the effects of domestic abuse within the family home, this was not a common theme within the larger data analysis. However, it was important to highlight. Comments from the participants have been removed from this document due to data protection.

*NB: This information was passed to the coaches at the time of disclosure as a duty of care. After the camp both parents and children received appropriate support and help through SSOP and the Veteran Centre.*

## Young People's Mental and Emotional Health

Throughout the narratives, participants described the effects of deployment and the impact subsequent parental mental health had on their own mental and emotional health. The emerging themes included anxiety, self-harming behaviours and feelings of sadness. Moreover, this theme of emotional health of the participants demonstrated they continue to carry the effects of military deployment, and a perceived loss of a 'secure' relationship with their veteran parent.

### Anxiety

Within the collective narratives surrounding anxiety, the majority of participants described living in a state of anticipation, forward thought planning and living in an environment not conducive to positive mental health.

*"Yes, if there was conflict the day before. I was anxious for getting up the next day [in case there was going to be more conflict]."*

*"It's hard. It's like being in a hurry, but a lot more. Mentally overthinking stuff...when I am in this situation, I know that I think a lot, I just don't know what, maybe about the situation, or what my dad has been through..."*

*"Definitely scared, it's scary to feel anxious all the time."*

*"In school I keep worrying about him, how is he, how is he doing. I find it hard to concentrate."*

As described within multiple narratives and demonstrated above, it was more than living with the anticipation of conflict, but the impact worrying about a parent, forward forecasting and always being alert had on their abilities to function on a daily basis.

### Self-harm

Due to some of the participants not having emotional 'down time', they disclosed that to cope with difficult situations at home, they would use harming behaviours to regulate their emotions. For some, this was used on more than one occasion as an intervention to reduce emotional and physical pain

*"I can hit the wall, and just do stupid stuff; it's hard to talk about. I have banged my head into the wall, multiple times. I have over thought and when I do that, I don't get any sleep. I take it out on the wall because I don't want to take it out on others."*

*"I cry a lot and find other ways to get that pain away."*

As noted from the above quotes a number of participants described maladaptive coping strategies to regulate their emotions.

*NB: This information was passed to the coaches at the time of disclosure as a duty of care.*

### Feelings of sadness

A large number of the participants explained feelings of sadness. There was however, an apparent distinction between feeling sad because they missed a deployed parent and those whose sadness presented as low mood.

*“I miss him a lot. Something is missing at home, we have a big house, and when someone is missing it’s like empty. Kind of sad, something that is not there, which is normally there. Its tiresome, no matter how sad I am I know he won’t be home, so I try to not think about it so I am not sad.”*

*“Sad - that’s more like inside me, and no one can see it when I go to school every day, usually I am sad and I keep up a façade and I don’t show my emotions in school.”*

These presentations of feelings of sadness had a wider impact. Specifically, it created emotional conflict for the participants due to a perceived façade they upheld. This façade allowed them to cope with the complexities of their day-to-day lives and interactions with others, to avoid creating additional concerns for their family and their wider network.

### Connectedness

Some participants highlighted a difficulty in connecting with their civilian peers due to feeling ‘different’. Their perceived difference centred on the participants’ experience of growing up in a military family and having a parent with a mental health problem as a result of active combat.

*“I feel sad, and feel bad, I feel like I am not a human, it’s like feeling different compared to others - When I am with my friends and their families, it feels like I am a different human.”*

*“I generally don’t feel good about myself – I put on a facade.”*

This difficulty to connect resulted in feelings of being loneliness, leading to participants feeling they had to put on a façade in order to interact and communicate with others. This was due to a perceived lack of understanding from others. Participants felt their civilian counterparts did not understand their lives within a military family, nor did they feel their friends understood what it was like to have a parent with PTSD due to military combat.

*“I am willing to talk about it, it is like this in my family, and my friends say they understand but that annoys me, because they don’t... their dad does not have PTSD, their families are not that stressed they cry because they don’t get sugar on their breakfast. My friends are not part of the military community. It is usually me*

*who my friends come to with issues and I don't feel like I have anyone who I can go to with my issues, they just don't understand it."*

*"Amongst my friends. Not really. They don't really understand it because they don't have very much experience in it, so they are not very understanding about it but I try to get them to understand but I don't talk about it very much."*

## Loneliness

Due to a lack of understanding from their peers who had no military experience, the participants' own life experience in relation to the military and their parent's poor mental health could not be explored. Consequently, the participants' feelings were not validated by their friends, thus creating feelings of loneliness.

*"I didn't know what was happening. So, I think I kind of shut down and just yeah just was on my own."*

*"I was very sad, and felt lonely, because I couldn't be together with other people, not physically, but emotionally. I feel loved by my parents but not my friends."*

*"It is usually me who my friends come to with issues and I don't feel like I have anyone who I can go to with my issues, they just don't understand it."*

Ultimately, participants entered into a continuous cycle where not feeling connected created feelings of loneliness, which in turn stopped them from connecting with their peers. By not connecting, many participants were seen as different, exacerbating their difficulties in connecting. For many participants, this often resulted in being bullied.

## Bullying

A number of participants acknowledged that their bullying was as a result of their parent being in the military and being singled out as different to their peers. These participants were a minority within their school due to being part of a military family.

*"Well, when my dad was deployed it was very, very tough. I've always been bullied at school and it definitely got worse when my dad was deployed. It definitely got worse with the bullying and all of that when my dad was deployed because I was more vulnerable at that time. I had kids actually specifically bullying me with my dad being deployed I had a kid coming up to me saying 'oh, hey your dad is out in the field because he doesn't want to be with you'. So, it definitely was hard for me at that time."*

*"Two schools merged and a boy in my class, he was always angry. He would call me bad things - you are different to the others, and stupid. It made me feel sad, and I was crying all the time at school. It's still hard to go to school, I am still sad, but I am not cry. It is better and I am just living with it, so I am just trying."*

The participants acknowledged that bullying had a detrimental effect on their emotional health and well-being and their ability to positively connect with their civilian peers. This led one participant to disclose the following:

*“I started to ignore it and would not give a reaction to the bullies. That ended up with me getting ignored completely. I think it is better being bullied than being ignored. It’s better to have someone to acknowledge you, even if that is fighting you than being completely invisible, in their eyes.”*

All the above quotes signify a perceived lack of understanding from those whom the participants sought a genuine and positive connection with. Ultimately, this left many feeling lonely and resulted in bullying due to being different.



'Toxic Waste' Activity at SSOP Annual Camp, August 2019



## Evaluation of SSOP Annual camp

Participants completed a mental well-being measure at baseline and post-camp to determine if attendance at SSOP's annual camp had any impact on their mental well-being. To further explore the impact of the camp, focus groups were conducted where narratives highlighted participants' experiences of attending SSOP's annual camp.

### Overall Mental Well-Being

The mental-wellbeing of participants was measured using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) at baseline and post-camp. All analyses are based on the scores from 41 young people who completed the WEMWBS at baseline and post-camp.

### Baseline vs. Post-Camp Overall Well-Being Scores

Overall scores on the WEMWBS were calculated and defined as low, moderate and high at baseline and post-camp (see Figure 2). The number of young people with low well-being scores decreased from nine to four, those with moderate well-being scores decreased from 22 to 21 and high well-being scored increased from 10 to 16 following participation at the SSOP annual camp.

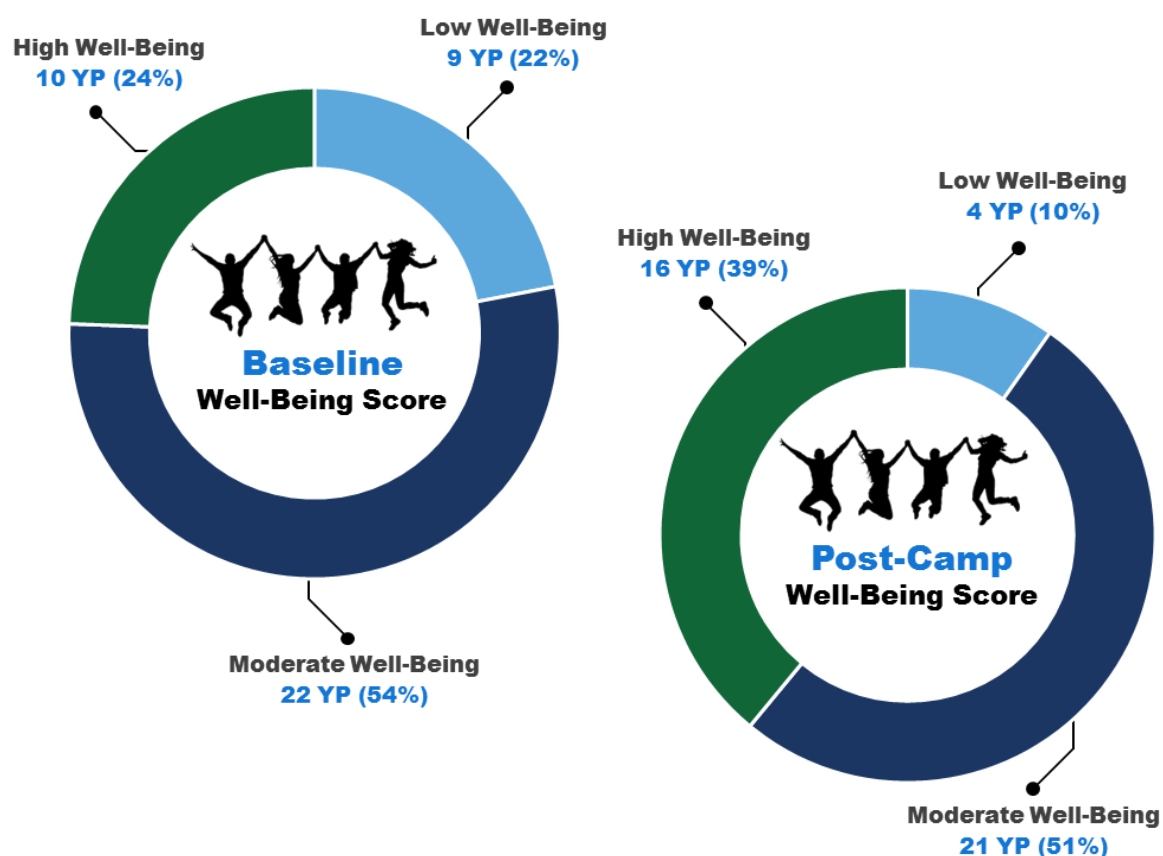


Figure 2. Percentage of young people with low, moderate and high well-being at baseline and post-camp (N=41)

The mean well-being score for all participants was calculated at baseline and post-camp (see Table 1). A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-camp well-being scores (mean = 55.70) were statistically significantly higher than baseline well-being scores (mean = 51.59),  $Z = -3.446$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = -0.38$ . Spending a week at the SSOP camp had a significant positive impact on participants' well-being scores.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for overall well-being at baseline and post-camp well-being scores (N=41)

	Overall	
	Mean	SD
Baseline	51.59	10.16
Post-Camp	55.70	9.54

**68% of participants had significantly improved well-being scores after one week**

### Baseline versus Post-Camp Scores on WEMWBS Statements

To further explore this improvement in well-being, descriptive statistics for scores on each statement of the WEMBWS were calculated (see Table 2). Increases in mean scores for each statement, from baseline to post-camp were evident, except for the statement "I've been feeling relaxed" which saw a minor decrease. To determine if these differences were statistically significant, further analysis was undertaken.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for scores on each question on the WEMWBS (N=41).

	Baseline		Post-Camp	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	3.61	1.02	4.00	1.03
I've been feeling useful	3.66	1.11	3.98	.73
I've been feeling relaxed	3.90	1.24	3.70	1.02
I've been feeling interested in other people	4.00	.834	4.39	.83
I've had spare energy	3.29	1.31	3.66	1.11
I've been dealing with problems well	3.40	1.08	3.98	.92
I've been thinking clearly	3.23	1.19	3.66	.88
I've been feeling good about myself	3.83	1.14	4.02	1.15
I've been feeling close to other people	3.76	1.16	4.32	.82
I've been feeling confident	3.39	1.22	3.63	1.24
I've been able to make up my own mind about things	3.80	1.27	3.90	1.01
I've been feeling loved	3.93	1.17	4.17	.82
I've been interested in new things	4.05	1.02	4.15	.82
I've been feeling cheerful	3.71	1.03	4.15	.82

Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Tests were carried out on scores from each statement to determine if there was a statistically significant change from baseline to post-camp. Only six statements saw a statistically significant change in mean scores from baseline to post-camp. Analysis indicated:

- *“I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future”* post-camp scores (mean = 4.00) were statistically greater than baseline scores (mean = 3.61),  $Z = -2.876$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $r = -0.32$ .
- *“I’ve been feeling interested in other people”* post-camp scores (mean = 4.39) were statistically greater than baseline scores (mean = 4.00),  $Z = -2.652$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $r = -0.30$ .
- *“I’ve been dealing with problems well”* post-camp scores (mean = 3.98) were statistically greater than baseline scores (mean = 3.40),  $Z = -3.030$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $r = -0.34$ .
- *“I’ve been thinking clearly”* post-camp scores (mean = 3.66) were statistically greater than baseline scores (mean = 3.23),  $Z = -2.234$ ,  $p = .025$ ,  $r = -0.25$ .
- *“I’ve been feeling close to other people”* post-camp scores (mean = 4.32) were statistically greater than baseline scores (mean = 3.76),  $Z = -2.952$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $r = -0.33$ .
- *“I’ve been feeling cheerful”* post-camp scores (mean = 4.15) were statistically greater than baseline scores (mean = 3.71),  $Z = -2.857$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $r = -0.32$ .

The analysis above, indicates that participants felt more optimistic about the future, were more interested in others, felt they were dealing with problems better, thinking more clearly, feeling closer to others and feeling more cheerful after attending SSOP annual camp.



Young people and coaches at ‘Gorilla Park’ mid-week at SSOP Annual Camp, August 2019

## The Narrative Evaluation

The narrative evaluation of the camp was broken down into three overarching themes looking at participants' experiences of coming to the camp, their reflections of the camp and supporting change.

### Coming to the Camp

Many of the participants found out about the camp through existing contacts or their parents. The process of recruitment to the camp demonstrated prior connections with SSOP or at least an awareness of the services they provide through word of mouth or social media.

*"Yeah I learnt it through my dad. He saw it through a veteran face book page. There was someone talking about the camp and all of that. Yeah, he told me about it and I thought it sounded interesting so I went."*

*"I was in a meeting with one of the coaches at the veterans centre about making some groups for the older veteran children, and we just talked about it and spoke about other veteran children who I brought into the meeting and a coach told me about the camp."*

Once the participants knew about the camp it was evident from the narratives that most of the participants were encouraged by their parents to attend. The focus of this encouragement centred on the opportunity for the participants to connect to other young people who were in a similar situation, resulting in a potentially positive experience.

*"It was my mum who said to me it would be fun, you will meet people who will know your history and you may get some new friends and will teach you something new with other friends you have away from school."*

*"My mum told me I would meet other people who would know how I feel so that's why I came."*

The emerging themes described by the participants with regards to what they expected from attending the camp were to connect with people who were from military families, who had been through similar situations as them and to meet new friends. These expectations are consistent with previous findings on loneliness.

*"To see kids that can relate to the problems you have at home with a dad or mum or any parent that is in the military. Just to have someone you can relate with."*

*"Usually I feel alone, so when there's some that gets it or understands it and I know they do, then I just get happy...I didn't know if I was going to talk to anyone or find friends, but I have spoken to a lot of people here."*

The participants' narratives identifying a hope to connect with others aligns with the findings within 'Being a Military Child in Denmark'. Participants described striving to connect

with their peers who understood who they were and their experiences of loneliness, living with a parent with poor mental health due to military combat and the complexities of family life.

The positivity and engagement the camp offers the participants is evident within the narratives of those who return to the camp year after year. The camp provides a safe space for the participants to engage with likeminded peers, offers support, tools for self-development, compassion and time to relax.

*“I feel more self-confident, more self-confident over the years. When I was 11, I started using makeup cos I felt I was not very good looking. I stopped using it because I felt more self-assured, I felt more self-confident.”*

*“It has made me much braver at stretching myself, getting out of my comfort zone.”*

*“There has been development within my life due to coming here, it’s something I can feel. I think everybody at the camp can feel that.”*

*“Everything I have learnt about other people, knowing I am not alone with the thoughts I have; I will try to just keep fighting, and of course the friends.”*

Moreover, a number of the narratives identified a need to return to the camp to refresh the skills learned.

*“Last time I was here I had more self-confidence, which went. So, I thought when I come here, I will get that back again”.*

*“An old dog can always learn new tricks. That’s why I think I keep coming back”.*

The participants narratives conclude the reasons for returning to the camp were to consolidate their learning, to build on existing lessons, to create positive memories and to move forward with more confidence, greater self-esteem and to extend their social network. These reasons are in line with the outcome measurement of impact on the Success Pyramid.

### Reflections of the Camp

During the interview process and as part of the evaluation of the camp, the participants shared their reflections of the camp and how the camp had affected their lives. Throughout the analysis, narratives focussed on connectedness, on the camp as a non-judgemental safe space and the importance of the light circle (an activity during the camp).

Connectedness emerged as the most prominent aspect of attending the camp. Participants’ expectations concentrated on the desire to make new friends, connect with like-minded peers and create new memories.

*“Meeting new friends, because it’s something I have been missing.”*

*“At first, I was annoyed you have to take your phone away, but I haven’t missed it. The time I have been here you have so many friends and so many things to talk about, so you don’t miss it. It’s like freedom.”*

*“I think we have all made at least one friend here, and I have not seen anyone walking alone after Monday.”*

One participant, who described feeling isolated from their peers, counted down the days to the camp starting. This participant’s explanation of wanting to connect, amplified the importance participants placed on attending the camp.

*“I look forward to the camp. I count the days to the camp because I am alone where I live.”*

The participant’s reflections demonstrated that the camp was not just about connecting physically, but was a place where they could connect with others emotionally.

*“It’s the feeling of not being the only one with a father with PTSD diagnosis.”*

*“I can talk to the others and they recognise my emotional feelings and I can ask them for advice.”*

The narratives highlighted the importance of coming together and sharing experiences. Participants described the camp environment as a place of safety, where they could discuss any personal issue. Here, they were supported with any issues they disclosed and were not judged by the coaches or their peers.

*“...nobody judges anybody.”*

*“...a place where there are some people who can relate to problems at home and all of that. It’s nice to have a space where you can talk to people about those things.”*

*“I use this as a place of space where I can just be myself and relax before I have to get back and conform be different be something where I might not be able to be totally myself. I have to perform something.”*

*“...you see that people are struggling before they do the activities and then when you start you don’t see them struggle, you’re not the only one who has it hard.”*

The overall aim of the camp was to create a safe space for those attending to become more self-aware, develop new skills and have the courage to openly discuss any concerns they may have. The courage of the participants, to openly explore their emotions in front of their peers was captured mid-week when some of the older participants took part in the light circle. The light circle is a guided exploration of the participant’s thoughts, feelings and emotions in relation to something that is impacting on their emotional health and well-being.

*“In the beginning it touched it me more than I had expected it would be.”*

*“You feel a lot of compassion.”*

*“I definitely got something out of it. It was nice to say some, put some words on a feeling you have and [lead coach] is very good at finding those words in you and helping you and guiding you through it, so yeah, I definitely got something out of it.”*

*“The light circle is something I will get the most out of in the long run. It helped me to talk about things even though it was hard, and to listen to other people’s story I got a lot of information out of that.”*

*“I think it was the Light Circle because when that is really the time of the camp when you can learn all the peoples’ history of their lives; why they are here. What problem they have and really say to them you are not alone on this camp, we feel exactly the same way that you do, and you can talk with anybody.”*

The above narratives demonstrate the importance of the light circle to the participants who took part. Furthermore, the light circle maps on to the Success Pyramid as a tool where the participants demonstrated sharing, mirroring and witnessing of self and others, having the courage to be vulnerable and share raw emotions indicating an insight into their own situation.



The Light Circle at SSOP Annual Camp, August 2019

Every participant highlighted the value of the staff attending the camp and the personal sacrifices the coaches underwent to attend. Moreover, the coaches were described as compassionate people who positively engaged with the participants and supported their needs.

*“Knowing they are taking a vacation just for us, means a lot that’s amazing of them [coaches].”*

*“I have a lot of respect for Bente, and the coaches. We are all together.”*

The participants were grateful of the knowledge and the experience each coach brought to the camp and the willingness to share this knowledge with the participants.

*“I have met many friends and the coaches support you in getting better and feeling good about yourself.”*

*“Their energy, their skills to talk to people, their care [coaches].”*

The importance of the shared values between the coaching staff and the participants enabled the development of a trusting relationship, which in turn created an empathic, compassionate and nurturing environment.

## Supporting Change

As part of the narrative evaluation, participants explored felt the camp had improved their emotional development. Within this and the results from the quantitative data, there is a clear positive increase in the emotional health presentation of the participants.

*“Before I came here, I was really ashamed of what they are thinking about me because of my dad and talk bad about him. I have learnt that I don’t have to do that. It’s ok to talk about it, it doesn’t have to be a secret.”*

The majority of the participants highlighted the camp as being a positive experience that enhanced their abilities to be open and discuss their emotions in a safe environment. Participants also shared areas of the camp they did not enjoy and ways the camp could improve to support the various ways in which the participants learned and engaged.

*“We don’t get enough breaks, and I don’t think the coaches get enough breaks. So maybe it could help everybody, if there were more breaks.”*

*“To talk about it in another way, do some different activities and come with some new tools to control the different things you have [emotionally].”*

A number of the participants felt that in addition to the individual support provided by SSOP, they would benefit from more opportunities to meet as a group throughout the year. Specifically, some participants suggested the development of intermittent bespoke support



post-camp or additional camps to allow them to reflect, refresh and engage in positive connections.

*“It’s like you know, we come here for a week once a year. Yeah that’s fine but the thing that you are just suggesting is like if we just do that maybe one more time a year is like a weekend and a week two different times a year.”*

Within all of the data, the emerging themes of connectedness, emotional growth, unconditional support and positive interactions were vital components to personal development.



Young people connecting during a team building task at SSOP Annual Camp, August 2019

## Conclusions

The aim of the evaluation was to understand the experiences of children and young people from veteran families and to critically evaluate the impact of SSOP's annual camp on the emotional well-being, decision making, confidence, resilience and self-esteem of participants attending the annual camp. Consideration was also given to the use of the Success Pyramid as a measurement tool.

An initial literature review identified a paucity of research looking at the experience of children and young people from Danish military families. In order to alleviate this gap in research, narratives of the lived experience from the perspective of the participants from Danish military families were collected. The emerging themes centred on military life and deployment, parental mental health, young people's emotional and mental health and connectedness. These narratives set the scene for the evaluation of SSOP's annual camp. To evaluate SSOP's annual camp, a mixed methods design was utilised. A quantitative measure determined the mental well-being of participants at baseline and post-camp to ascertain any changes over the course of the camp. Qualitative focus groups were then carried out, enabling the collection of narratives and thus creating a voice of the military child.

A statistically significant increase in participants' overall mental well-being scores from baseline to post-camp was identified. Specifically, analysis showed that 68% of participants, had significantly improved well-being scores as a result of attending SSOP's annual camp. Statistically significant improvements were also found on six of the individual statements from the mental well-being scale. These focussed on optimism, interest in others, dealing with problems well, thinking clearly, feeling close to others and feeling cheerful. Each one of these maps onto the levels of the Success Pyramid (see Figure 1).

To further explore the impact of the camp on the participants, thematic analysis was carried out on their narratives. This resulted in three main themes: coming to the camp, reflections of the camp and supporting change. Within the theme looking at the experiences of coming to the camp, the majority of participants noted hearing about the camp through social media and through already established connections with SSOP. All participants identified that their parents strongly encouraged their attendance at the camp. Reasons for attending the camp focussed on expectations of finding people with shared experiences, to connect and alleviate feelings of loneliness. For participants who returned to the camp each year, the main reasons were to revisit and consolidate prior learnt skills.

In the second theme, participants reflected on their experiences of the camp. There was a consensus that the camp provided a non-judgemental, safe space where they could develop

skills to enable them to problem solve and work through challenges they were experiencing in their life. Throughout the camp, participants were supported by the coaches and their peers. This was particularly evident in participants' narratives of the light circle, where they were guided by a trained physiotherapist [lead coach] to share their experiences with their peers, mirror and be a witness to others and gain insight into their own situation. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance and value of the coaches at the camp. Throughout the camp, the coaches were approachable, engaging and demonstrated compassion, understanding, and empathy and were highly skilled in the resolution of numerous problems, including conflict resolution.

The final theme considered supporting change, focussing on personal change and suggestions for improvement of the camp. All participants identified the camp as a positive experience that allowed them to develop skills to help regulate and share their emotions. Utilising the safety of the camp environment gave the participants an opportunity to explore their emotions and understand how to positively deal with their problems. The main suggestion for improvement of the camp, was the desire for greater contact throughout the year, between the camps. This was primarily in the form of additional camps and social gatherings to continue the development of their resilience, problem solving and positive mental outlook and to ensure contact with their network was maintained.

It is evident from the findings within this evaluation that SSOP's annual camp made a significant difference to the emotional well-being of the young people who took part. The camp offered the participants stability, a secure place to grow in a relatively short space of time, an opportunity to connect with their peers and foster their confidence, self-esteem, resilience and decision-making abilities. Narratives from the participants whom returned each year, highlighted the potential long-term impact of SSOP's annual camp.

The strength of this research lies in the mixed methods. Utilising a validated mental well-being measure ensured robust and reliable findings. These were supported by the narratives of the participants who attended the camp, allowing further exploration of their experiences. The evaluation of the camp also demonstrated great overlaps with the levels on the Success Pyramid, suggesting this is a plausible measurement tool for the impact of SSOP's camps. Future research evaluating the potential long-term impact of SSOP's annual camp identified by participants, would be advantageous to ascertain the longevity of the improvement in emotional well-being and skills developed.

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## Appendices

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale Baseline	Appendix A
Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale Post-Camp	Appendix B
Semi-Structured Interview Schedule	Appendix C
Semi-Structured Focus Group Schedule	Appendix D


# Questionnaire

Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts.




Please tick the face that best shows how you felt over the last **2 weeks** for each statement

					
I've been feeling optimistic about the future					
I've been feeling useful					
I've been feeling relaxed					
I've been feeling interested in other people					
I've had spare energy					
I've been dealing with problems well					
I've been thinking clearly					
I've been feeling good about myself					
I've been feeling close to other people					
I've been feeling confident					
I've been able to make up my own mind about things					
I've been feeling loved					
I've been interested in new things					
I've been feeling cheerful					

I feel connected to children and young people like me...

I feel I can solve challenges I face in my everyday life

What are you most looking forward to at the camp?

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If there is anything else you would like to say, please write it here...

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# Questionnaire




Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts.

Please tick the face that best shows how you felt over the last **week at camp** for each statement


					
I've been feeling optimistic about the future					
I've been feeling useful					
I've been feeling relaxed					
I've been feeling interested in other people					
I've had spare energy					
I've been dealing with problems well					
I've been thinking clearly					
I've been feeling good about myself					
I've been feeling close to other people					
I've been feeling confident					
I've been able to make up my own mind about things					
I've been feeling loved					
I've been interested in new things					
I've been feeling cheerful					





Because of the camp, my connection with children and young people like me is...

I feel I can solve challenges I face in my everyday life

How was your overall experience of the camp?

What did you enjoy about the camp?

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What was your least favourite thing about the camp and why?

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Would you recommend the camp to other children and young people from veteran families?

Yes  No

Please explain your answer


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## Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

What's it like being a young person within a military/veteran family?	
<p>What is home life like for you?</p> <p>Is there any mental health issues which affect the family home?</p> 	<p>Poor home – In what way?</p> <p>Build on answers – i.e. parental MH issues, self MH issues.</p> <p><b>NB. Raise any concerns with SSOP coaches.</b></p>
<p>Good in what way?</p> <p>Build on answers – i.e. are you connected, what do you do together??</p>	<p>What was life like prior to PMH?</p>
	<p>What was life like pre diagnosis?</p>
	<p>What was life like when parent got diagnosis?</p>
	<p>What is life like post diagnosis?</p>
<p>What are your expectations of the camp?</p>	<p>How has PMH impacted on your life?</p>
<p>What are you most looking forward to?</p>	<p>Build on answers from questionnaire.</p> <p>NB. We will need to collate the data from these ASAP prior to interviews.</p>

## Semi-Structured Focus Group Schedule

Use the following questions as prompts for discussion by the group around their experiences of the annual camp. Ensure all participants are given space to contribute.

- How did you find out about the camp?
- What made you come?
- What were your expectations of the camp before you arrived?
  - What were you most looking forward to?
- How do you feel the week has been?
- What did you enjoy about the week?
- Was there anything you did not like?
- Did the camp meet your expectations?
- Do you feel the camp has made a difference?
  - Explain...
- What will you take away from this week?
- Would you recommend the camp to other children and young people?





SOME KIDS ARE **SMARTER** THAN YOU,  
SOME KIDS HAVE **cooler clothes** THAN YOU,  
SOME KIDS ARE **better at sports** THAN YOU,  
**≧IT DOESN'T MATTER.≦**  
YOU HAVE **your** THING TOO.  
BE THE KID WHO CAN **GET ALONG**.  
BE THE KID WHO IS **generous**.  
BE THE KID WHO IS **happy** FOR OTHER PEOPLE.  
BE THE KID WHO DOES THE **RIGHT THING**.  
*Be the nice kid*

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*“Well something we always say in my family is that even though there are clouds  
in the sky, the sun is always behind and they can move in the wind...”*

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