

# 'Dropping in and out':

Social media and internet-based communication amongst Naval families during separation.

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## Foreword

We have all experienced an increased dependency on technology in all of our lives in recent years, and in particular the use of mobile communications with the concomitant increased use of social media across different personal electronic devices for most family members. This brings with it enormous opportunities, but also many challenges. I would therefore like to thank Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) and the Naval Children's Charity for following up on their report published in May 21 'Impact of Service Life on the Military Child: The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict Update' to look at and understand how this has impacted on our naval families when in many cases this is often the only way families can stay connected when deployed.

We need to rapidly understand how the separation of families whilst deployed places a burden on children in particular, and increasingly how 'weekending' or short notice deployments, impacts on the relationship between the serving family member and their children and how important social media connections are in closing this gap.

The research provides enough data points for us to evaluate and discuss the changes we need to make to improve our digital frameworks whilst continually balancing that with the need for operational security. There is much for us to continue to do but I very much welcome the independent insights provided.



**Vice Admiral Martin  
Connell CBE**



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## About the Authors

The Veterans & Families Institute for Military Social Research (VFI) at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) was established in 2014 to provide research, consultancy, and impact within the military and veteran community. To date, the VFI has produced over 150 peer reviewed papers and reports and has contributed to a range of national and international panels, boards, and commissions. Staff within the VFI are drawn from a wide range of research and policy backgrounds. The VFI benefits from a deep understanding of Service Life, and the associated positives and challenges that Service children may experience. The VFI recently authored 'The impact of Service Life on the Military Child' report for the Naval Children's Charity, highlighting key areas in which Service children face challenges associated with military life.

The Cluster for Education Research on Identities and Inequalities (CERII) is the home of education research at ARU. The cluster brings together expertise in a range of topics related to identities and inequalities in education, including: gender, sexuality and care in education; sustainability in education; early childhood; arts, education and inclusion; critical pedagogies in education; and race, ethnicity and migration in education. CERII have undertaken research projects with a broad range of funders, for example the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the European Commission, the DfE, the British Academy/Leverhulme fund, Advance HE, the SRHE, Norfolk County Council, and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

The 'Impact of Service Life on the Military Child: The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict Update and Review Report' was published by Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) and the Naval Children's Charity (NCC) in May 2021. This report identified a gap in our understanding related to how significant leaps in technology over the past few decades have impacted on parent-child communication during military separation.

Deployment is an expected and integral part of military life in the UK Armed Forces, meaning military children can be separated from their serving parent for months at a time. Furthermore, separation of families during the week, or 'weekending', has become more common as Ministry of Defence (MOD) policies encourage military families to own their own home. Naval families in the UK experience both the longest deployments and the highest rates of 'weekending' compared to the Army and Royal Air Force. As such, Naval children often have to maintain their relationship with their serving parent remotely, pulling on range of different communication avenues, including social media.

The use of social media has become increasingly prevalent in children and young people, increasing with age (Ofcom reports that 35% of 5-year-olds, 45% of 10-year-olds and 95% of 15-year-olds stated they have used social media in 2020). As such, we cannot ignore the potential impact of social media and internet-based communication (SM/IBC) on the experience of Service families during separation.

This report outlines:

- 1) *A review of the international literature focused on social media use by civilian families and military families to communicate during separation*
- 2) *The findings of the first UK research project focused on understanding how Naval families use social media during separation, and the impact of this on the relationship between the serving family member and their children*

### Literature review: Social media use by families in the civilian context

A desktop review of the international literature was carried out, focused on the use of social media and internet-based technologies for communication during separation in civilian families.

The international literature suggests that individual attitudes towards social media and internet-based communication (SM/IBC) play a significant role in how families manage virtual relationships, with positive attitudes facilitating positive experiences of SM/IBC between parents and their children. Furthermore, SM/IBC appears to be particularly

beneficial where families have limited opportunities for face-to-face contact (i.e., due to demanding work and social lives or separation), and this is shown to have a positive impact on the wellbeing of family members who are away from home.

Video synchronous types of SM/IBC (i.e., video technology that facilitates communication in real time) is found to facilitate feelings of closeness and connectedness when families are separated, due to the ability to interact virtually face-to-face. However, the civilian literature highlights several practical challenges for families who are separated in different countries, including differences in internet infrastructure and challenges associated with time zone differences.

## Literature review:

### Social media communication in military families

We undertook an international scoping review of the literature, focused broadly on all evidence related to military families' experience of using SM/IBC during separation. We identified just 11 relevant papers and reports, the majority of which were from the United States, and did not include children in their samples.

The international literature suggests that SM/IBC may be able to address some of the challenges associated with traditional methods of communication (i.e., letters and phone calls), including working around family schedules and keeping serving parents involved in their children's day-to-day lives. As in civilian families, video synchronous communication appears to be preferred, and related to increased feelings of connectedness in separated military families.

However, several practical barriers to using SM/IBC were identified internationally, including differences in access to SM/IBC between deployment locations and across different military ranks, roles, and Service branches. Indeed, Naval personnel were identified as experiencing the most separation, and the most inconsistent access to reliable communication infrastructure. Additional barriers include managing time differences, personal cost of mobile data when Wi-Fi is not available, and the impact of communication blackouts (i.e., when all communication avenues are closed to maintain operational security).

The international literature suggests that the increased opportunities for communication provided by SM/IBC is related to better wellbeing in children. However, practical barriers related to interruptions in connectivity can exacerbate children's anxiety around parental safety. Furthermore, for serving parents, the competing demands of the military and managing their family's expectation for communication can be difficult.

## Qualitative research methods

We conducted virtual interviews and focus groups with:

- 25 children of currently serving Naval personnel, aged between 11-21
- 21 non-serving spouses or long-term partners, including those in blended families, of currently serving Naval personnel, who have children under the age of 21

These interviews and focus groups focused on the experience of family communication during separation, the main benefits and challenges of SM/IBC and how it differs from traditional communication, the impact of SM/IBC on Naval children and young people and their relationship with their serving parent, and suggestions for support or changes to help improve communication.

Interviews/focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. Comparative analyses were carried out where we interviewed both children and their non-serving parents (for which we had 11 pairs), to explore if and how perspectives differed.

## Qualitative research findings

Findings were split into five areas of focus, which are outlined below.

1. *How do Naval families use social media and internet-based communication during periods of separation?*

We found widespread use of SM/IBCS amongst Naval children/young people and spouses/partners, for communication with their serving family member during separation. There appears to be a preference amongst Naval families for using both WhatsApp, due to its broad functionality (i.e., group chats, sharing photos), and video call applications. The ease with which Naval children/young people were able to use SM/IBC was evident, as most will have grown up using internet-based technology.

The frequency with which Naval children/young people and spouses/partners used SM/IBC to communicate with their serving family member was varied, depending on deployment location and access to the internet. Submariner families, however, are severely restricted in their ability to utilise this method of communication during deployment, and are best described as non-users of SM/IBC.

2. *How can social media and internet-based communication facilitate communication in Naval families?*

Naval children and young people were aware of how important it was to maintain their relationship with their serving parent during separation, and the parent-child experiences they were missing out on compared to their peers. Both groups discussed the benefits of SM/IBC with their serving family member, including the ease of use and



immediacy/instant connection it facilitated, in comparison to traditional methods of communication (i.e., letters, phone calls).

The opportunities that SM/IBC provided in involving serving parents in their children's day-to-day lives (i.e., sharing photos, regular updates) and maintaining the parent-child relationship were highlighted by both groups. These benefits were particularly associated with video-based applications, which enable face-to-face contact. Furthermore, video-based communication appears to engage younger children particularly well, and enable older children to feel more comfortable in sharing certain things with their serving parent.

3. *What challenges are associated with social media and internet-based communication for Naval families?*

SM/IBC presents a number of unique challenges over and above those associated with traditional methods of communication (i.e., time differences, communication blackouts, additional costs). These include practical barriers associated with variable and unstable internet connectivity on deployment, which preclude Naval families from capitalising on the benefits of SM/IBC. This appears to be further impacted by role and rank of Naval personnel, with those of higher rank suggested to have better or more stable access to SM/IBC. Furthermore, Submariners were highlighted as having the least access to SM/IBC due to the nature of their deployments, which often severely restrict communication.

The emotional impact of these practical barriers to communication on young people and spouses/partners was highlighted by participants. A lack of contact from serving parents, caused by unstable or interrupted connections or missing calls, was associated with concern, upset and anxiety for children and young people. This was often due to increased expectations for regular contact as a result of SM/IBC, causing children and young people to feel concern or worry for the safety of their serving parent when they did not hear from them.

An additional challenge reported by both groups was the difficulty experienced in determining whether to share day-to-day stresses with their serving family member.

4. *Comparing the perspectives of Naval spouses/partner and their children*

There were 11 cases in which we spoke to both the Naval spouse/partner and their child(ren). Our comparative analysis of parent and child responses suggests broad agreement of the benefits of SM/IBC in facilitating communication with their serving family member, and how practical issues such as internet connection and time differences can impact of communication.

However, there appears to be a disconnect in satisfaction with how they communicate with their serving family member and how often this is possible. This was evident where the at-home parent was satisfied with the amount and type of communication with their serving partner, but their child(ren) reported limited expectations of

communication, and a desire for different methods of communication. In addition, it was evident that some partners/spouses were unaware of their child(ren)'s concern or worry for the safety of their serving parent, with some children and young people reporting that they tried to mask these feelings from their parents.

5. *What changes could be made to help Naval families maintain the parent-child virtual relationship during separation?*

Young people and spouses/partners made several suggestions of how to better support virtual family relationships during separation. Whilst participants acknowledged the limitations of providing internet connectivity on deployment, both groups suggested that the Royal Navy improve facilities for SM/IBC, including better Wi-Fi and access to video-based technology on ship.

Additionally, many spouses/partners felt that the Royal Navy could provide better communication and updates to families (i.e., Newsletter updates on deployments), including better information about security blackouts to reduce concern and worry. Furthermore, some spouses/partners felt that financial support from the Royal Navy was necessary to help families struggling with the additional costs of communication (i.e., mobile data costs).

Better support and resources for young people and families was suggested in several areas, including improved and more centralised information regarding deployment and how best to manage family communication. Importantly, participants highlighted the need to tailor these resources appropriately for different age groups and family members. Children and young people also expressed a desire for the development of a network or community of Naval children and young people, to enable them to share experiences and support each other.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It is evident from the international literature and the findings of this research that SM/IBC provides unique opportunities for maintaining virtual family relationships during military separation, with evidence of a positive impact on children's wellbeing. However, the increased expectation for regular communication provided by SM/IBC can have unintended consequences. Where practical barriers cause interruptions in connectivity or a lack of contact from serving parents, children and young people report increased concern, worry and anxiety. As such, it is important that Naval families are supported to make the best out of the opportunities that SM/IBC afford, whilst managing expectations of communication.

Based on the findings of this report, we make the following 12 recommendations for policy, practice, and research focused on Naval and military children and families. These have been split into those directed towards the Royal Navy and/or Ministry of Defence, the military charity sector, and researchers in the field. We present recommendations with the associated key findings from this research.



Recommendations for the Royal Navy/Ministry of Defence		
#	Key Findings	Recommendation
1	<p><b>The impact of inconsistent internet connectivity</b></p> <p>Findings from both the international literature and our interviews/focus groups with Naval families highlight the inconsistent internet connectivity experienced by Naval Personnel, and the difficulties this can create in maintaining virtual family relationships. Inconsistent access was related to differences in communication infrastructure across deployment locations and appears to vary by rank and occupational role. The unreliability of SM/IBC experienced by families created anxiety and upset for both spouses/partners and their children, and several participants suggested that the Royal Navy should review or improve their Wi-Fi facilities for Naval Personnel.</p>	<p><b>Ongoing assessment of internet connectivity</b></p> <p>We recommend that the Royal Navy monitor and audit their Wi-Fi facilities on Naval bases and ships, to ensure parity of access across Naval Arms, ranks and roles, as far as is feasible. We recognise that it is not always feasible to provide or enhance Wi-Fi in all deployment locations or across all Naval Arms (e.g., for those in the Submarine Service); however, the Royal Navy should ensure that clear guidance is in place to manage the expectations of Naval personnel and families regarding the use of SM/IBC during separation. Whilst the findings of this research relate specifically to Naval families, we recommend that other Service branches also review and monitor their internet facilities for Service personnel and families on base and during deployment, to support them in maintaining virtual family relationships.</p>
2	<p><b>Benefits of video-based communication</b></p> <p>Both existing international research and the findings in this report support military family's preference for utilising video-based communication to maintain virtual relationships during separation. Furthermore, we found that this method of communication was suggested to better engage younger children in communication with their serving parent, enable Naval personnel to remain involved in their child's day-to-day life, and to support the maintenance of the child-parent relationship. Indeed, some participants felt that it would be beneficial for the Royal Navy to provide fixed facilities on ship for enhanced video communication during deployment (i.e., computer stations with internet and camera facilities).</p>	<p><b>Supporting video-based communication</b></p> <p>Whilst we recognise that it may not be feasible to provide fixed facilities for Naval personnel to record videos or engage in video-based communication on ship, we recommend that the Royal Navy review how other Naval organisations (i.e., those across the 5 Eyes nations) support Naval personnel to use video-based communication and look to implement examples of best practice, including how use of this type of facility might be supervised. It is also recommended that clear guidance is provided to Naval personnel as to how they might engage with family members via video, during periods of inconsistent internet access (i.e., by pre-recording videos prior to deployment, or during times of connectivity), to maintain their relationships with their children during separation</p>

3	<p><b>Increased expectations for communication</b></p> <p>Many of the challenges for Naval families identified in this report and the existing literature relate to difficulties in balancing increased expectations for communication due to the rise in SM/IBC, with the realities of military life (i.e., time differences in deployment locations, communication restrictions, unpredictable working hours) and unreliable internet connectivity on deployment. Naval families expressed a desire for better communication from the Royal Navy regarding deployments in general, resources, communication methods (i.e., how to access blueys), and offers for families, and instances in which communication would not be possible (i.e., communication blackouts).</p>	<p><b>Enhanced communication with families and managing expectations</b></p> <p>We are aware that the Royal Navy has recently relaunched the Royal Navy Forum, which provides a hub of resources and information for Naval families in the UK. We recommend that the Royal Navy review and promote awareness of this Forum amongst families and ensure that information is kept comprehensive and regularly updated. This should include guidance related to access to communication methods (e.g., including how to access blueys) and restrictions on what information can be shared to maintain operational security, to manage families' expectations of communication with their serving family member. We further recommend that the Royal Navy designate a moderator within this Forum to provide clear statements to families relating to communication blackouts and restrictions where possible, with clear direction as to when these will be lifted or when further updates will be provided. Additionally, we recommend that the Royal Navy review the consistency with which deployment newsletters are used across Naval Arms and deployments, to ensure parity of experience for families as far as is feasible.</p> <p>Consideration should also be given to the development of a resources site for professionals working with Naval children (across education, health and social care), to enhance awareness of their support needs and support services available, utilising the model provide by the Royal Navy Forum. We suggest that charitable organisations, such as the Naval Children's Charity and the Naval Family Federations, should raise awareness and signpost to these resources.</p>
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Recommendations for the military charity sector		
#	Key Findings	Recommendation
4	<p><b>Lack of resources for managing communication</b></p> <p>As mentioned in Recommendation 3, many of the challenges experienced by Naval families in this research and the existing international literature related to managing expectations of SM/IBC within the constraints of military life and operational security. Furthermore, Naval spouses/partners in this research highlighted the paucity of guidance and resources for older children to support them in maintaining their relationship with their serving parent during deployment.</p>	<p><b>Developing resources for military children</b></p> <p>We are aware that there exist several resources to support military children during the deployment of a parent, including the 'Knit the family' resource provided by the Naval Children's Charity. We recommend that these resources are reviewed and amended to provide guidance specifically related to maintaining virtual relationships (i.e., including strategies for how best to utilise SM/IBC, such as pre-recorded videos, bedtime stories) and managing expectations for communication considering the challenges reported in this research (i.e., inconsistent internet connectivity, restraints on communication due to blackouts and operational security). We further recommend that separate resources are developed for older children and young people, to ensure that the guidance is targeted appropriately for developmental age. Furthermore, this is in line with Recommendation 21 of the 'Living in Our Shoes' report, which highlights the need for age-appropriate resources in this context.</p>

5	<p><b>Inconsistent awareness and support in schools</b></p> <p>Naval families in this research highlighted the inconsistency across different schools in their awareness of the challenges faced by military children. This is a finding that is consistent with recent UK research focused on military families (i.e., the 'Impact of Service Life on the Military Child' and 'Living in Our Shoes' reports). However, this report highlights specifically the inconsistent support provided to children to facilitate maintenance of the parent-child relationship, considering difficulties in communication caused by time zone differences, family schedules, and inconsistent connectivity.</p>	<p><b>Ensuring awareness and support in schools</b></p> <p>We are aware that the Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP) have developed a resource to help schools support military children, the 'Thriving Lives Toolkit'. Whilst the toolkit does prompt practitioners to consider supporting virtual communication, we recommend that guidance within and around this Toolkit includes strategies and advice on how best to support children to maintain their virtual relationship with their parent during separation, with a particular focus on safely utilising SM/IBC. This should be co-produced with children and young people to ensure it reflects their needs. We further recommend that the Naval Children's Charity and/or other military charities work with schools to disseminate this guidance and best practice for supporting military children. Additionally, in line with Recommendation 27 of the 'Living in Our Shoes' report, we suggest that the Department for Education (DfE) collect systematic information about how the Service Pupil Premium is being used to support Service children in schools during deployment and separation, and promote the sharing of best practice in this context.</p>
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<b>6</b>	<p><b>Desire to connect with other Naval children</b></p> <p>The Naval children and young people that we spoke to highlighted how isolating it can feel to be a military child, particularly in areas and schools with low numbers of military children. There was a clear desire to connect with other Naval children, to share experiences and develop networks of support, particularly for older children and adolescents. Additionally, children and young people discussed the innovative ways in which they would like to communicate with other children and their serving parents, for example, utilising multi player online games and shared online spaces.</p>	<p><b>Develop a community for Naval children and young people</b></p> <p>We recommend that innovative ways of enabling children to connect and network with other children are developed, for example, utilising apps and shared online spaces. This is in line with acknowledgement in the 'UK Armed Forces Families Strategy: 2022-2032', of the need to utilise technological advancements, such as social media, to develop virtual communities and support for military families. We recognise the need to consider safeguarding in online spaces for children and recommend careful consideration of this during the development of online/social media-based solutions.</p> <p>We are aware of existing Youth Forums in the military community, including SCiP's Connected Forces Project, open to Service children aged 16-19, and the Royal Navy Youth Forum, run by Royal Navy Family People Support. We recommend a review of awareness and reach of this and other youth forums, as the children and young people in our research did not appear to be engaged with these. We are also aware that the existing 'Kings Camps' for Naval children during school holidays are being developed to include a specific event for older children. As such, we recommend that any app or online space provides signposting to this and other events that would enable Naval children to connect with each other face-to-face.</p> <p>Additionally, we recommend that the Naval Children's Charity and other military charities consider developing an 'Ambassador' scheme, where young people with lived experience of military separation can volunteer to provide peer support and signposting to other military children.</p>
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<b>7</b>	<p><b>Meeting the costs of social media and internet-based communication</b></p> <p>It is evident from our research and the international literature that some military families struggle to meet the costs of maintaining SM/IBC. This is most commonly due to the need for purchasing additional mobile data by Service personnel where Wi-Fi is unavailable or unreliable during deployment, to enable them to speak to their families. Whilst most families interviewed did not have this problem (likely related to the virtual nature of data collection in this study), they indicated that there were other families who did experience these difficulties.</p>	<p><b>Financial support for Naval families</b></p> <p>We are aware that several charities provide means-tested financial support to Naval families, including the Naval Children's Charity. As such, we recommend that charities publicise the availability and eligibility for means-tested support and include details about accessing financial support in deployment resources for families. We also recommend that barriers to accessing this support are reviewed, to ensure support is reaching those families who need it most.</p>
<b>Recommendations for research</b>		
<b>#</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
<b>8</b>	<p><b>Difficulties associated with virtual data collection in younger children</b></p> <p>As our research was conducted during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, adherence to restrictions around social distancing meant that all data collection had to take place online. Due to the complexities of engaging children effectively in research, we took the decision to include children and young people between the ages of 11 and 21 years, who were deemed able to express themselves independently in a virtual interview or focus group. However, we recognise that the experiences of younger children are likely to differ significantly regarding using SM/IBC.</p>	<p><b>Research with young military children</b></p> <p>We recommend that future research focused on military children's communication with their serving parent include children under the age of 11 years and employ appropriate methods for engaging with these children and enabling them to express themselves (i.e., face-to-face, utilising creative activities).</p>



<p><b>9</b></p>	<p><b>Lack of research in other Service branches</b></p> <p>Our research focused on the Naval family's experiences of SM/IBC during separation. Whilst it is likely that Naval family's experiences are relevant to other Service branches, nuances in military life across branches (i.e., length and location of deployments, differences in 'weekending' and mobility) mean that findings cannot be directly applied without further research. Indeed, international research suggests that Naval families may experience more difficulties in communication than those in other Service branches, due to increased separation and poorer access to the internet during deployment on ships.</p>	<p><b>Research with other Service branches</b></p> <p>We recommend that research investigating experiences of SM/IBC and managing virtual family relationships is undertaken with the British Army and Royal Air Force, to determine if challenges are replicated or differ between populations.</p>
<p><b>10</b></p>	<p><b>Lack of representation from Submariner and Royal Marine families</b></p> <p>Our research suggests that Submariner families have a very different experience of communication compared to other Naval Arms, due to the restrictions for communication whilst on a Submarine. As such, the Submariner families were best described as non-users of SM/IBC with their serving family member during separation. However, we were only able to speak to two Submariner spouses/partners and their children, meaning further research is required to better understand the experience of this population. Furthermore, despite targeted recruitment strategies, we were unable to recruit any Royal Marine families for this research, meaning that the Royal Marine family experience of communication remains unexplored.</p>	<p><b>Research with underrepresented Naval populations</b></p> <p>We recommend that research is conducted investigating the experience of Submariner and Royal Marine families in using SM/IBC during separation. This will enable targeted support to be developed for these populations, who remain underrepresented in UK research</p>

<p><b>11</b></p>	<p><b>Difficulty accessing current serving Naval Personnel</b></p> <p>Whilst we were able to capture the experiences of Naval spouses/partners and children/young people within our research, we were prohibited from speaking to Naval personnel directly without Ministry of Defence ethical approval. Whilst we attempted to obtain this approval, the nature and length of the process meant that this was not possible within the timeline of this project. As such, our findings related to Naval Personnel's experiences come indirectly through their at-home family members.</p>	<p><b>Research with Naval Personnel</b></p> <p>We recommend that future research engages with the Royal Navy/other Service branches, to ensure access to current Service Personnel. Engagement with military gatekeepers should occur as early as possible in the research process, and additional time should be allocated to ensure that the length of the process and any delays do not impact the ability to include this population. This will enable exploration of the perspectives of this group in managing relationships with their family at home, and how this compares to the experience of spouses/partners and children. We further recommend that the experiences of male and female Service personnel are included, alongside analyses of differing experiences by gender.</p>
<p><b>12</b></p>	<p><b>Impact of SM/IBC on Service children's wellbeing remains unclear</b></p> <p>Our review of the existing international literature identified gaps in our understanding of how military children utilise SM/IBC (i.e., what type do they use/prefer, how often do they communicate with their serving parent) and the impact of this on their wellbeing. Our qualitative data suggests a preference for synchronous communication (i.e., enabling communication in real-time) with their serving parent, but significant variation in frequency across families. Furthermore, whilst families highlighted the benefits and challenges of SM/IBC in facilitating parent-child virtual relationships, the direct impact of this on children's wellbeing was unclear.</p>	<p><b>Quantitative research investigating how children/young people use SM/IBC</b></p> <p>We recommend that quantitative research is undertaken to investigate children's use of SM/IBC to communicate with their serving parent, for example using a diary study to determine preference and frequency. We further recommend research to explore how the frequency and type of SM/IBC used is related to children's wellbeing during and after separation from their serving parent. This will further support the development of targeted guidance and resources for maintaining virtual parent-child relationships.</p>



## Introduction

In May 2021, the Veterans and Families Institute for Military Social Research (VFI) at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) and the Naval Children's Charity (NCC) published 'The Impact of Service Life of the Military Child: The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict Update and Review Report'<sup>1</sup>. This report provided an updated review of all UK literature published since the original 'Overlooked Casualties of Conflict'<sup>2</sup> report in 2009, focused on the experiences and challenges faced by military children.

This report highlighted several challenges previously acknowledged as impacting children with parents in the Armed Forces, including the interruption of education caused by frequent relocation, and the difficulties associated with separation from their parent during deployment. However, it also highlighted the changes that have occurred since the 2009 report, including changes in the military family policy landscape and significant leaps in technology, changing the way in which military families communicate during separation. The rise of social media and internet-based communication (SM/IBC) over the past decade was highlighted, increasing the potential for more regular and varied communication with serving parents, but also for access to misinformation shared on social media platforms. Indeed, the recently launched 'UK Armed Forces Families Strategy: 2022-2032'<sup>3</sup>, highlights the potential for advancements in technology to mitigate the impact of separation on family dynamics.

However, we know very little about how military children consume and respond to social media, and importantly how they use SM/IBC technologies to communicate with their serving parent whilst separated from them. Considering this, the NCC commissioned the VFI to carry out a qualitative investigation of the impact of SM/IBC on managing the parent-child relationship during military-related separation in Naval families, the results of which form the basis of this report.

### Managing family relationships during separation in military families

Deployment is an expected and integral part of military life for the UK Armed Forces. At the beginning of 2020, 11,000 UK Service personnel were deployed overseas<sup>4</sup>. According to the most recent Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitudes survey (FAMCAS), 80% of Service families have children, with 55% reporting that they have children of school age<sup>5</sup>. As such, most Service personnel will need to manage their relationships with their children at a distance during deployment.

1 Godier-McBard L, Wood A & Fossey M. The Impact of Service Life on the Military Child: The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict – Update and Review Report. 2021.  
2 The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund. The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict. 2009.  
3 Ministry of Defence. UK Armed Forces Families Strategy: 2022-2032. 2022.  
4 Ministry of Defence. A Decade of Deployments: 2010 to 2020. 2020.  
5 Ministry of Defence. UK Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2021. 2021.

The Royal Navy experience the longest deployments, with Harmony guidelines allowing up to 660 days away from base over 36 months, followed by 498 days for Army Personnel, and 468 days for Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel<sup>6</sup>. This is evident in responses to FAMCAS: Naval spouses/partners are more likely to report separation of over three months in the past year, compared to other Service spouses/partners (32%, compared to 17% in the Army and 21% in the RAF)<sup>7</sup>, and Royal Navy personnel more likely to feel their operational deployment is too long, compared to personnel in other Service branches (23%, compared to 8% in the Army and 18% in the RAF)<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to this, Naval families are also more likely to live away from their serving family member during the week, seeing them only at the weekend (often referred to as 'Weekending'). This is due to the increase in Service families owning their own home, rather than moving with their serving family member from post to post. These families are often referred to as 'Dispersed Families'<sup>9</sup>.

As a result of longer deployments and increased instances of 'weekending', UK Naval families experience the most separation from their serving family member. Naval families must navigate this experience, pulling on a range of different communication avenues to remain connected with their serving family member. Historically, this included predominantly letters or 'Blueys'<sup>10</sup> and phone calls when possible. However, the rise of SM/IBC has led to many new technologies and methods of contact, from email to instant messaging and video calls.

The ability to communicate regularly during separation is found to buffer the adverse effects of separation for Service children, enabling their parent to continue to provide them with emotional support<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, research with UK Naval spouses and children highlights that those who lack the resources for regular communication during separation appear to be more risk of poor outcomes<sup>12</sup>.

### Social media use in children and young people

As a prominent feature in our daily lives, we cannot ignore the potential impact of SM/IBC on the experience of Service families during separation.

The use of SM/IBC by children has become increasingly prevalent over the last decade,

6 Ministry of Defence. Quarterly service personnel statistics 1 July 2021. 2021.  
7 Ministry of Defence. UK Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey Results 2021. 2021.  
8 Ministry of Defence. Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey: 2021. 2021.  
9 Royal Air Force Families Federation. RAF Dispersed Families. 2019.  
10 A 'bluey' is an aerogram, provided to enable contact between Service personnel and their families during deployment, and named due to the blue paper on which letters are written.  
11 Godier-McBard L, Wood A & Fossey M. The Impact of Service Life on the Military Child: The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict – Update and Review Report. 2021.  
12 Gribble R and Fear NT. The Effect of non-operational family separation on family functioning and wellbeing among Royal Navy/ Royal Marines Families. 2019.



with its presence in our day-to-day existence increased further since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Ofcom statistics show that social media use by children is substantial, with use increasing by age: 35% of 5-year-olds, 45% of 10-year-olds and 95% of 15-year-olds state they have used social media<sup>13</sup>. In 2020, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram were the social media platforms most frequently used by children, with TikTok and Twitch gaining in popularity. The use of instant messaging apps was also prominent, for example 78% of 12- to 15-year-olds and 53% of 8- to 11-year-olds stating they have used WhatsApp, despite the minimum age limit being 16.

## Social media and communication during military-related separation

Research published in 2019 suggests that Naval children still most commonly contact their serving parent by phone; however this is closely followed by SM/IBC, such as Skype, FaceTime, and Facebook<sup>14</sup>.

As discussed above, the 'Impact of Service Life on the Military Child' report<sup>15</sup> in 2021 highlighted the need to investigate SM/IBC between serving parents and their children during military-related separation. Within this report, a range of subject matter experts (SMEs) discussed the potential benefits and negative consequences of this type of communication.

The benefits of SM/IBC suggested by SMEs included the potential for families to keep in more regular contact, which may in turn smooth family reintegration post separation:

***“It’s actually keeping them in contact and hopefully in the long run will help when that parent comes home.”***

This finding is supported by an international review of the literature which found that increased communication between serving parents and their children (although not specific to SM/IBC) helps ease some of the adverse effects of separation<sup>16</sup>. This highlights the potential for the instant and regular communication facilities provided by SM/IBC technologies to further buffer the impact of parental separation for children and young people.

However, SMEs also raised several potential challenges associated with SM/IBC between serving parents and their children. Firstly, “seeing” a parent via videoconferencing may

13 Ofcom. [Online Nation: 2021 report](#). 2021.

14 Gribble R and Fear NT. [The Effect of non-operational family separation on family functioning and wellbeing among Royal Navy/ Royal Marines Families](#). 2019.

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

16 Blamey H, Phillips A, Hess DC and Fear NT. [The impact of parental military service on child wellbeing](#). *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 2019; 5(S2): 29–69.

be more upsetting for children compared with traditional communication, reminding them of their separation. Furthermore, SMEs raised concerns that the instant nature of SM/IBC increased Service families’ expectations for regular communication from their serving family member, causing difficulties if these expectations were not met. Additionally, the potential for increased anxiety for children around parental safety was noted if the ability to communicate was sporadic or suddenly cut off, for example, due to communication blackouts that can occur due to security breaches or emergency situations during deployment:

***“So, let’s say this happens two or three times, when your kid wants to see Mum or Dad and it’s starting to build up. Where is Dad? Why is he not talking to us? Why can’t we get him on the phone? Is there a real problem?”***

Difficulties caused by poor internet or phone reception have been highlighted previously in research with UK military families, particularly for children deployed in ‘hard to reach’ environments, causing anxiety when the serving parent is not contactable<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, this may be particularly pertinent for Naval families, for whom a lack of internet connectivity on ships has previously been highlighted<sup>18</sup>.

Finally, SMEs emphasised that where regular communication was facilitated, families face possible challenges when making choices about whether to share challenges and stressful events happening at home:

***“Whereas now, because everything is quite immediate, you can be going through some sort of catastrophic thing at home and immediately report that to your serving person in some sort of cases”***

17 Children’s Commissioner. [Kin and Country](#). 2018.

18 Maritime Charities Group. [The needs and aspirations of the dependant and families of seafarers under retirement age](#). 2016.



## How did we carry out this study?

As outlined above, our previous research with SMEs highlighted the potential benefits and challenges experienced by military families as a result of the increased use of SM/IBC technologies for communication during military-related separation. This in turn has the potential to impact on the ability of the serving parent to maintain their parenting role and relationship with their children.

As such, the central research question investigated in this study was:

## What is the impact of social media/internet-based communication during separation on managing the Naval parent-child relationship?

To address this aim, this project had the following objectives:

1. To determine what is known internationally about the use of SM/IBC in civilian families
2. To determine what is known internationally about the use of SM/IBC during separation in military families
3. To identify how UK Naval children and non-serving parents communicate with the serving parent, with a specific focus on social media
4. To identify the benefits and challenges associated with using social media to facilitate family communication during separation for UK Naval families
5. To explore the impact of SM/IBC on the Naval parent-child relationship during separation

To achieve these objectives, we carried out:

- A. A desktop review of the literature related to the use of SM/IBC in civilian families
- B. A systematic scoping review of literature related to the use of SM/IBC in military families
- C. Interviews and focus groups with Naval spouses/partners and children focused on communication during separation using SM/IBC

## Structure of this report

This report will first present a brief overview of what the literature can tell us about the use of SM/IBC between parents and children during separation in civilian families.

We will then share the findings of a systematic scoping review focused specifically on how military families use SM/IC during military-related separation.

Finally, we share the findings of a series of interviews and focus groups with Naval children and young people, and Naval spouses/partners, exploring their experiences of communication (with a particular focus on SM/IBC) with their serving family member, and how they manage parent-child virtual relationships.

For this report, social media and internet-based communication (SM/IBC) is defined as:

*Internet-based applications that allow users to generate and exchange content<sup>19</sup>*

As new social media sites are developed frequently and their popularity with different age groups changes, we have not limited our research to specific social media platforms. When comparing with traditional communication methods, we refer to families' use of phones, letters, Forces Free Air Letters (FFALs, otherwise known as 'blueys'), and email (whilst this is internet-based, it is not generally considered in the same terms as social media and newer internet-based technologies).

## Social media use by families in the civilian context: an overview of the evidence.

The next section provides an overview of the literature focused on the use of SM/IBC technologies for communication during separation in civilian families.

## How do civilian families use social media for communication?

People use social media for a variety of reasons, one of which is to communicate with family and friends<sup>20</sup>. Researchers have argued that online communication between parents and their children parallels their offline communication, meaning families who have transparent discussions and communication offline are likely to have transparent discussions online<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, perceptions of 'connectedness' and 'closeness' have been reported by families through increased use of SM/IBC<sup>22</sup> and through high levels

19 Kaplan AM, Haenlein M. *Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media*. Business horizons. 2010; 53(1):59-68.

20 Whiting A, Williams D. *Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach*. Qualitative Market Research. 2013;16(4):362.

21 Fang S, Gong H. *What happens after young adults' "friending" of parents? A qualitative study about mediated family communication and privacy management in China*. Mobile Media & Communication. 2020;8(3):299-317.

22 Williams AL, Merten MJ. *iFamily: Internet and social media technology in the family context*. Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal. 2011;40(2):150-70.



of mobile phone use between parents and adolescents<sup>23</sup>. This level of closeness was increased using synchronous (i.e., communication in real time, such as video calls) rather than asynchronous (i.e., email or text message) modes of communication.

Attitudes towards social media appear to play a role in managing SM/IBC within families, with positive attitudes towards social media leading to parents feeling better able to manage their own and their children's social media use without it having a negative impact on the family relationship, such as damaging family communications<sup>24</sup>. Similarly, for those who consider online communication to be important for their relationships, this type of communication can have a positive effect on relationship satisfaction and feelings of closeness<sup>25</sup>. This evidence suggests that individual attitudes towards SM/IBC play a significant role in how successful this type of communication is in maintaining family relationships.

## What are the benefits and challenges of communicating using social media for civilian families?

Social media may be used as means of communicating to maintain family bonds and close relationships, particularly where families have limited opportunities for face-to-face communication; for example, where family members have busy work and/or social lives<sup>26</sup> and social media can enable families to interact without requiring face-to-face contact<sup>27</sup>. However, these perceived benefits of 'connectedness' and 'closeness' can be lost when there is 'disconnect' between individual members of the family. This 'disconnect' can be due to SM/IBC causing misunderstandings between family members or SM/IBC being perceived as causing distractions to family communications<sup>28</sup>.

Family bonds can also be maintained via social media where families are separated by geographical distance<sup>29</sup>. This is shown to support the wellbeing of any family members

23 Padilla-Walker LM, Coyne SM, Fraser AM. [Getting a high-speed family connection: Associations between family media use and family connection](#). *Family Relations*. 2012;61(3):426-40.

24 Procentese F, Gatti F, Di Napoli I. [Families and social media use: The role of parents' perceptions about social media impact on family systems in the relationship between family collective efficacy and open communication](#). *International journal of environmental research and public health*. 2019;16(24):5006.

25 Sullivan KT, Riedstra J, Arellano B, Cardillo B, Kalach V, Ram A. [Online communication and dating relationships: Effects of decreasing online communication on feelings of closeness and relationship satisfaction](#). *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 2020;37(8-9):2409-18.

26 Abel S, Machin T, Brownlow C. [Social media, rituals, and long-distance family relationship maintenance: A mixed-methods systematic review](#). *New Media & Society*. 2021;23(3):632-54.

27 Williams AL, Merten MJ. [iFamily: Internet and social media technology in the family context](#). *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*. 2011;40(2):150-70.

28 Storch SL, Ortiz Juárez-Paz AV. [The role of mobile devices in 21st-century family communication](#). *Mobile Media & Communication*. 2019;7(2):248-64.

29 Storch SL, Ortiz Juárez-Paz AV. 2019. See above.

who are away from the family home<sup>30</sup>. This is particularly relevant to military families, for whom SM/IBC may support the wellbeing of the serving family member whilst they are away from home.

Video synchronous forms of SM/IBC such as FaceTime, Skype, and WhatsApp video chat, appear to be particularly beneficial to supporting family relationships. These methods of communication allow separated families to spend long periods of time together virtually and carry out day-to-day tasks during the call, creating a situation of 'omnipresent co-presence'<sup>31</sup>. This situation requires SM/IBC resources and the space and time for the family to carry out family practices and routines at a distance. For example, where a parent has moved abroad for work, communicating synchronously and visually with family at home allows the parent to cook with their family, play musical instruments together and 'parent at a distance', such as reminding their children to do their homework<sup>32</sup>. These visual forms are also easier to engage young children in than a phone call<sup>33</sup> and allow changes in young children to be seen by the recipient of the call<sup>34</sup>. This suggests that visual synchronous communication may be particularly beneficial to supporting military families in managing relationship during separation. However, this type of communication requires effort, with the participants feeling the need to perform or put on a show for their family<sup>35</sup>.

Where families are living in different countries, they can experience a range of practical issues when communicating. These can include a 'digital divide' between the two different countries, with one country experiencing significant issues in terms of social media infrastructure<sup>36</sup>. There can also be issues where families are communicating across different time zones, resulting in synchronous communication being more difficult<sup>37</sup>.

As discussed above, serving personnel may face frequent and long separations from their families during military-related separation (i.e., due to deployments or living away from the family home during the week). As such, they are likely to experience several

30 Bacigalupe G, Bräuninger I. [Emerging technologies and family communication: The case of international students](#). *Contemporary Family Therapy*. 2017;39(4):289-300.

31 Nedelcu M, Wyss M. [Doing family through ICT-mediated ordinary co-presence: transnational communication practices of Romanian migrants in Switzerland](#). *Global Networks*. 2016;16(2):202-18.

32 Cabalquinto EC. [Home on the move: negotiating differential domesticity in family life at a distance](#). *Media, culture & society*. 2018;40(6):795-816.

33 Share M, Williams C, Kerrins L. [Displaying and performing: Polish transnational families in Ireland Skyping grandparents in Poland](#). *New Media & Society*. 2018;20(8):3011-28.

34 King-O'Riain RC. [Emotional streaming and transconnectivity: Skype and emotion practices in transnational families in Ireland](#). *Global Networks*. 2015;15(2):256-73.

35 Share M, Williams C, Kerrins L. 2018. See above.

36 Farshbaf Shaker S. [A study of transnational communication among Iranian migrant women in Australia](#). *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*. 2018;16(3):293-312.

37 Cao X, Sellen A, Brush AB, Kirk D, Edge D, Ding X. [Understanding family communication across time zones](#). In *Proceedings of the 2010 ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work*. 2010 (pp. 155-158).



benefits that the reviewed evidence suggests civilian families enjoy with increased connectivity and social media communication. However, as identified in the 'Impact of Service Life on the Military Child' report<sup>38</sup>, the challenges associated with this may be exacerbated due to extended separations and the difficulties associated with this. For example, deployed parents can find themselves in military situations that lack or have unstable internet access, leaving children 'disconnected' and not able to experience the benefits of family 'connectedness' through social media. To determine if the benefits and challenges identified in relation to SM/IBC in civilian families are also reported by military families, the next section will look at the international literature related to SM/IBC in military families.

## Summary of findings

- Individual attitudes towards SM/IBC play a significant role in managing virtual family relationships, with positive attitudes facilitating positive experiences
- SM/IBC is particularly beneficial where families have limited opportunities for face-to-face contact, and this is shown to support wellbeing when family members are away from home
- Video synchronous communication in particular (i.e., communication in real time, such as video calls) appears to facilitate feelings of 'closeness' in separated civilian families, enabling families to spend time together virtually
- Practical issues for communication in families living in separate countries include differing internet infrastructure and time differences

## What do we know about social media communication in military families: Results of an international scoping review

This section reports the results of scoping review of the international literature focused on the use of SM/IBC in military families.

### How did we carry out this review?

We undertook an international scoping review of academic papers and grey literature both from the UK and internationally, following Arksey & O'Malley's<sup>39</sup> five step scoping review framework. Due to a lack of research focused specifically on Service children's experiences, this review focused more broadly on all evidence related to military families' experience of using SM/IBC during separation from their serving family member. In addition, due to the lack of research specifically focused on Naval families, we broadened the scope of the review to include the experiences of all Service branches.

After a review of the papers identified using key search terms in literature databases, by two members of the research team, 11 papers were deemed relevant and are discussed in the rest of this section. Most papers originated from the US (7), followed by the UK (3) and one paper from Canada.

More details of the search process and the characteristics of the papers identified during the review process can be found in [Appendix 2](#) & [Appendix 3](#) respectively. The rest of this section will report the key findings from these papers covering the use of SM/IBC in military families, and the benefits, challenges, and practical barriers to using SM/IBC during military separation.

### How do military families use social media and internet-based communication?

The international literature we identified during the scoping review suggests that, as with the civilian population, Service families do make use of SM/IBC for the purpose of communicating with family members. Furthermore, use of a wide variety of different

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

39 Arksey H, O'Malley L. [Scoping studies: towards a methodological framework](#). International journal of social research methodology. 2005;8(1):19–32.





technologies was evident in the literature<sup>40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48</sup>, including Skype, Facebook, and instant messaging. However, evidence of the use of SM/IBC specifically by Service children is limited<sup>49 50</sup>.

It is unclear from the available literature if Service families have an overall preference for traditional methods of communication (i.e., phone calls, emails and letters) or SM/IBC (i.e., WhatsApp, Facebook, FaceTime), and this is likely based on personal preference. Furthermore, preference also appears to be dependent on what is being communicated. For example, some research suggests families reserve video calls, such as Skype, for day-to-day conversations, and seek official/traditional routes of communication when sharing emergency news with their serving family member, to ensure that it is delivered in an appropriate way<sup>51</sup>.

### What are the benefits of using social media to manage family relationships during military separation?

The international literature highlighted several benefits of SM/IBC that some families may be able to capitalise on, namely the potential for increased communication opportunities, the convenience of synchronous methods of communication, and the heightened sense of connectedness when using face-to-face methods.

### Increased accessibility and frequency of communication

The international literature suggests that SM/IBC increases communication opportunities for military families with the at-home family members able to be reached regardless of where they are or what they are doing<sup>52</sup>. The difficulties associated with having to alter routines to facilitate communication is noted by both the Serving parents

40 Atwood, K. *Maintaining "the Family" During Deployment: Presence Work by Military Families*. 2014.  
41 Durham, S. W. (2015). *Service Members' Experiences in Staying Connected With Family While Deployed*. ANS Adv Nurs Sci. 2015; 38(4), 279-297.  
42 Goodney, R. *A mixed methods study of technological influences on communication and media exposure in military children experiencing parental deployment*. 2014.  
43 Gribble R and Fear NT. *The Effect of non-operational family separation on family functioning and wellbeing among Royal Navy/Royal Marines Families*. 2019.  
44 Children's Commissioner. *Kin and Country*. 2018.  
45 Konowitz, S. *Understanding How Army National Guard Families with Children Cope with Deployments*. 2013.  
46 Louie, A., & Cromer, L. *Parent-child attachment during the deployment cycle: Impact on reintegration parenting stress*. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice. 2014;45,496-503.  
47 Schachman, K. A. *Online fathering: The experience of first-time fatherhood in combat-deployed troops*. Nursing Research. 2010; 59(1), 11-17.  
48 Seidel, A. J., Franks, M. M., Murphy, G. F., & Wadsworth, S. M. *Bridging the distance: Illustrations of real-time communication of support between partners and deployed members of the national guard*. 2014.  
49 Gribble R and Fear NT. 2019. See above.  
50 Seidel, A. J., Franks, M. M., Murphy, G. F., & Wadsworth, S. M. *Bridging the distance: Illustrations of real-time communication of support between partners and deployed members of the national guard*. 2014; In *Military Deployment and its Consequences for Families* (pp. 21-35).  
51 Durham, S. W. 2015. See above.  
52 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.

and spouses in previous research<sup>53</sup>. As such, it is possible that SM/IBC has the potential to address some of the issues associated with more traditional forms of communication. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that serving personnel were more able to consider family schedules when SM/IBC was consistent and stable<sup>54</sup>. Additionally, SM/IBC allowed Service personnel to remain involved in key family moments such as holidays, milestones, and birthdays<sup>55</sup>.

Furthermore, two studies evidenced how the creative use of newer technologies can facilitate indirect communication about children (i.e., communication between the serving and at-home parent focused on their children) to keep the serving parent up-to-date with everyday moments. For example, the at-home parent sharing videos of everyday moments, such as dinner or bath time, by uploading them as private videos on YouTube. The type of indirect communication regarding Service children is important for maintaining a parental relationship, and allowed Serving parents to track their children's development, day-to-day routines and take part in some child-care choices<sup>56 57</sup>.

### The benefits of face-to-face and synchronous communication

Synchronous communication refers to communication that takes place in real-time, e.g. simultaneous conversation carried out in video calls or instant messaging. One US study<sup>58</sup> discussed the positive role that synchronous communication can play in enabling the serving parent to remain updated and engaged with any issues that might arise in real time. Social media has increased the number of available synchronous communication methods, such as internet-enabled calls, video calls and instant messaging, and therefore this may impact on the communication experiences of Service families that have access to SM/IBC.

International literature discussing communication via videocalls (mainly focused on Skype) paints a mixed, but generally positive, picture of how these technologies facilitate communication for Service families. Face-to-face communication, however, appears to have some specific benefits over and above general communication, with Serving families discussing how this can foster increased connectedness ("it makes me feel like he's here just talking") and allow families to see that their loved one is safe<sup>59 60</sup>. Furthermore, one US study captured the positive impact of face-to-face communication

53 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
54 Atwood, K. *Maintaining "the Family" During Deployment: Presence Work by Military Families*. 2014.  
55 Goodney, R. *A mixed methods study of technological influences on communication and media exposure in military children experiencing parental deployment*. 2014.  
56 Louie, A., & Cromer, L. *Parent-child attachment during the deployment cycle: Impact on reintegration parenting stress*. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice. 2014;45,496-503.  
57 Schachman, K. A. *Online fathering: The experience of first-time fatherhood in combat-deployed troops*. Nursing Research. 2010; 59(1), 11-17.  
58 Durham, S. W. *Service Members' Experiences in Staying Connected With Family While Deployed*. ANS Adv Nurs Sci. 2015; 38(4), 279-297  
59 Goodney, R. 2014. See above.  
60 Konowitz, S. *Understanding How Army National Guard Families with Children Cope with Deployments*. 2013.



on the Serving parent's wellbeing, with one participant starting that "after being on Skype for a while I could feel my face thawing out"<sup>61</sup>.

Not all Serving families report that face-to-face communication enhanced the quality of the interaction, for example due to poor connection on calls or feeling self-conscious<sup>62</sup>. Indeed, Skype was characterised as "like a phone" by participants in one study<sup>63</sup>, suggesting that in some cases SM/IBC may not have benefits over and above traditional communication. However, 80% of spouses in another study<sup>64</sup> did see the positive in being able to see their serving spouse on video calls, suggesting that the majority felt the benefit of face-to-face communication despite some challenges.

Furthermore, children across different international contexts have reported online communication, particularly video calls, as a positive form of communication with the potential to promote happiness<sup>65 66</sup>. Some children in these studies also reported feeling upset as a result of SM/IBC with their serving parent as it reminded them of them of the separation and absence of their parent. However, it is noted that this is exacerbated by the child's specific circumstances.

## Practical barriers associated with using social media for communication

Several practical barriers are evident in the literature regarding military families use of SM/IBC during periods of separation. These relate to limited communication infrastructure, internet connection issues, time differences due to location, financial barriers, and communication blackouts. The following sections outline these challenges and evidence of their impact on Service families.

## Communication infrastructure and connection issues

Serving parents report that communication infrastructure varies. For example, access to the internet differs between deployment locations<sup>67 68 69</sup>, with some providing good access, some with unreliable access, and others having no formal access, with Service personnel often opting to purchase prepaid internet data packages themselves. One

Canadian-focused study reported that communication infrastructure improved over time in some locations once the related military campaign became a long-term endeavour, for example installing internet infrastructure available via commercial contracts.

Where communication infrastructure is available, inconsistent access to communication due to connectivity difficulties was often noted as a challenge<sup>70 71 72 73</sup>, with one study suggesting that these technical difficulties did lead to some families choosing not to make use of SM/IBC<sup>74</sup>.

Access to the internet for communication for Service personnel was found to vary by Service branch and appeared to be associated with the length of time different Service branches spend on deployment. One study found that those in the Canadian Air force had greater access to regular communication due to having periods of rest at base, which often had good infrastructure (e.g., based in Italy whilst flying in Libya)<sup>75</sup>. Conversely, those in the Canadian Navy were characterised as being in a state of "constant separation" due to their reliance on satellites for communication and being regularly on duty. This is supported by UK literature that discusses the inconsistency of Naval Service personnel's access to connection, which is dependent on if, and where, they are deployed<sup>76 77</sup>. Indeed, as discussed in the Introduction section above, the UK Royal Navy spends more time on deployment in comparison to the other Service branches, and as such is likely to encounter more problems with communication.

Access to the communication infrastructure also appears to be related to specific occupational roles. In one study<sup>78</sup>, Canadian Air Force personnel discussed how those in communication roles had more access to communication equipment, therefore facilitating more communication with home. Conversely, serving personnel who routinely worked in roles managing emergency situations, such as natural disasters, often experienced poor communication due to having little notice to prepare what was needed to communicate back home.

It is unclear from the literature whether rank impacts on Serving personnel's access to communication. A survey with the United States Army National Guard found that frequency of communication with the family at home was not associated with

61 Durham, S. W. 2015. See above.

62 Konowitz, S. *Understanding How Army National Guard Families with Children Cope with Deployments*. 2013.

63 Atwood, K. *Maintaining "the Family" During Deployment: Presence Work by Military Families*. 2014.

64 Konowitz, S. 2013. See above.

65 Goodney, R. *A mixed methods study of technological influences on communication and media exposure in military children experiencing parental deployment*. 2014.

66 Gribble R and Fear NT. *The Effect of non-operational family separation on family functioning and wellbeing among Royal Navy/Royal Marines Families*. 2019.

67 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.

68 Children's Commissioner. *Kin and Country*. 2018.

69 Durham, S. W. 2015. See above.

70 Atwood, K. *Maintaining "the Family" During Deployment: Presence Work by Military Families*. 2014.

71 Children's Commissioner. *Kin and Country*. 2018.

72 Gribble R and Fear NT. *The Effect of non-operational family separation on family functioning and wellbeing among Royal Navy/Royal Marines Families*. 2019.

73 Schachman, K. A. *Online fathering: The experience of first-time fatherhood in combat-deployed troops*. *Nursing Research*. 2010; 59(1), 11-17.

74 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.

75 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.

76 Adey, P., Denney, D., Jensen, R., & Pinkerton, A. *Blurred lines: Intimacy, mobility, and the social military*. *Critical Military Studies*. 2016; 2(1-2), 7-24.

77 Gribble R and Fear NT. 2019. See above.

78 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.



rank<sup>79</sup>. However, evidence from one study suggested that rank may have an indirect impact on access to communication infrastructure, with participants highlighting that the Commanding Officer had additional access to satellite phones<sup>80</sup>. Whilst this suggests that those of higher rank had increased access to communication opportunities, participants in this study highlighted that the Commanding Officer would on occasion donate their opportunities to communicate, particularly to personnel who were struggling or had pregnant spouses or young children (typically younger personnel of lower rank)<sup>81</sup>. However, this finding is not solely related to SM/IBC. Additionally, other participants in this study highlighted the fact that some higher-ranking personnel have access to private computers due to their role, and as such may have increased access to SM/IBC<sup>82</sup>.

### Time differences

Deployment locations in significantly different time zones also presented a challenge for communication<sup>83</sup>. As a result of this, some families reported that it was difficult to find suitable times to communicate, which can be particularly difficult when working around school timetables<sup>84</sup>. Additionally, children expressed difficulty when time differences meant having to communicate late at night<sup>85</sup>.

### Financial barriers

Some research suggests that personnel may face financial challenges due to the expense of data plans or prepaid cell phones, where infrastructure that could facilitate free communication via the internet and social media, such as Wi-Fi, was lacking<sup>86</sup>. However, findings relate specifically to American and Canadian Serving families, and therefore these findings may not be transferable to UK Service families due to the potential differences in infrastructure and expense of data packages across different countries.

### Communication blackouts

Communication blackouts due to serious injury, death or a communication breach periodically remove all avenues for communication for military personnel in the US and

79 Konowitz, S. Understanding How Army National Guard Families with Children Cope with Deployments. 2013.  
80 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
81 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
82 Atwood, K. Maintaining "the Family" During Deployment: Presence Work by Military Families. 2014.  
83 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
84 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
85 Goodney, R. A mixed methods study of technological influences on communication and media exposure in military children experiencing parental deployment. 2014.  
86 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.

UK, both traditional and SM/IBC<sup>87,88</sup>. Blackouts can cause anxiety for children and families as they wait for confirmation that their serving person is safe when communications avenues are restored<sup>89</sup>. The wider implications of this anxiety are further discussed later when focusing on the challenges of SM/IBC. When instated due to a communications breach, research evidenced frustration from Service personnel as they felt punished as a group for the actions of an individual<sup>90</sup>.

### What are the challenges associated with managing virtual family relationships during military separation?

The international literature notes several challenges for Service families managing virtual family relationships via SM/IBC. It is significant to note, however, that many of these challenges are not unique to SM/IBC and are also evident in relation to traditional communication methods.

### Increased frequency of communication

The increased frequency of communication afforded by SM/IBC may not always be beneficial for military families. Participants in one study reported that whilst the quantity of communication may be high, the quality may be low, with 90% reporting their communications as "mediocre, tense, [or] limited"<sup>91</sup>. Furthermore, families in another study reported "too much communication" with their serving family member, with frequent communication associated with running out of topics to discuss, increased conflict/arguments, and a negative effect on Service person's focus on their role. Participants shared that due to increased communication via social media platforms, partners can hear things about military life "they shouldn't", for example "I got shot at today"<sup>92</sup>. As a result of this study, the author maintains that frequency of communication impacts intimacy. However, whether this impact is positive or negative is based on the individual family, i.e., what is considered too much communication or damaging for intimacy in some families, may be considered right for other families<sup>93</sup>.

### Sharing difficult and sensitive information

With the increased opportunities for communication that SM/IBC technologies bring, comes the increased potential to share day-to-day challenges and difficult news

87 Durham, S. W. Service Members' Experiences in Staying Connected With Family While Deployed. ANS Adv Nurs Sci. 2015; 38(4), 279-297  
88 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
89 Durham, S. W. 2015. See above.  
90 Durham, S. W. 2015. See above.  
91 Konowitz, S. Understanding How Army National Guard Families with Children Cope with Deployments. 2013.  
92 Atwood, K. Maintaining "the Family" During Deployment: Presence Work by Military Families. 2014.  
93 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.



between family members. Service families may have to navigate the sharing of bad news, whether this be to or from the Serving personnel, a challenge common to both traditional and SM/IBC communication<sup>94 95 96</sup>. Service personnel in two US studies discussed their experience of choosing not to share negative or troubling information with their families, to avoid causing them upset or worry, and described the negative impact that this had on their wellbeing (i.e., feeling “sucked up or bottled up”<sup>97 98</sup>). This experience was replicated within family members at home, with some participants in another study reporting that they often chose not to share bad news with their serving family member to avoid worrying them. Furthermore, those who did share bad news reported that they often waited until the situation had been resolved at home, or only disclosed news in the most serious circumstances<sup>99</sup>. It appears that SM/IBC may exacerbate this issue for military families, by enabling faster and more frequent communication. Indeed, the literature suggests that this does not necessarily benefit Serving personnel, as increased communication comes with increased choices about what should or should not be communicated to those at home<sup>100</sup>.

In addition to this, serving personnel may be prohibited from sharing some of their experiences during separation, as this may involve sensitive information that cannot be shared to maintain operational security. Both Serving personnel and their partners report that this can be a challenge<sup>101</sup>. Qualitative interviews with Serving persons deployed as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–11) or Operation Enduring Freedom (2001–14) reported that “we really lost pretty much any feeling of connectedness with back [home]” due to the constraints on their communication to maintain operational security<sup>102</sup>. This can be further complicated if families are not clear on what can and cannot be shared, with Serving personnel discussing the difficulty of having to educate their families on the constraints of operational security<sup>103</sup>. On this basis, Durham (2010) recommends that the military explores how to alleviate this burden and contends that “family education will be essential; this responsibility cannot rest solely on the soldier”<sup>104</sup>.

### Unspoken rules and strategies for managing difficult news

This literature points to some families evolving forms of coded language or unspoken rules to navigate the constraints of operational security or avoid sharing bad news<sup>105</sup>

94 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
95 Durham, S. W. *Service Members' Experiences in Staying Connected With Family While Deployed*. ANS Adv Nurs Sci. 2015; 38(4), 279–297.  
96 Durham S. W. *In their own words: Staying connected in a combat environment*. Military Medicine. 2010 1;175(8):554–9.  
97 Durham, S. W. 2015. See above.  
98 Durham S. W. 2010. See above.  
99 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
100 Durham S. W. 2010. See above.  
101 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
102 Durham S.W. *In their own words: Staying connected in a combat environment*. Military Medicine. 2010 1;175(8):554–9.  
103 Durham, S. W. *Service Members' Experiences in Staying Connected With Family While Deployed*. ANS Adv Nurs Sci. 2015; 38(4), 279–297.  
104 Durham S.W. 2010. See above.  
105 Atwood, K. *Maintaining “the Family” During Deployment: Presence Work by Military Families*. 2014

<sup>106</sup>. Families discussed intentionally not asking whether a day was a good or bad one, rather allowing the Serving family member to volunteer this information if they wished. Additionally, Serving personnel reported trying to call ahead before a communication blackout if possible to ensure their families knew they were safe. Part of this coded language was described as learning to “interpret sudden silence” due to a communication blackout, which occurred when there is a death, serious injury or communications breach<sup>107</sup>. For example, Service personnel reported that post-blackout, a mention that “you are going to have to call this guy’s wife” would indicate that this family was impacted by injury or death<sup>108 109</sup>. Understandably, the literature highlights the anxiety surrounding a Service person’s safety that families experience during these blackouts<sup>110</sup>. Whilst this challenge is not unique to SM/IBC, the additional instability of SM/IBC may prompt anxiety if a connection is lost, as families wait to see if a communication blackout has begun (“when you lose a call, you have no idea if everything is ok or not. I have to wait to get an email or a post on Facebook to know he is ok. It is nerve-wracking”)<sup>111</sup>.

### Engaging children in communication

Parents report difficulty getting children to engage with communication, with this challenge common to both SM/IBC and traditional communication methods. Differences are evident by age; with younger children potentially not wanting to talk or being easily distracted, and older children communicating less due to their busy social lives or hobbies<sup>112 113</sup>. Additionally, one study reported that older children can resent their Serving parent for missing key moments such as birthdays, holidays, and other important milestones, and that the upset caused by this can result in them not wishing to communicate with their Serving parent<sup>114</sup>. Families and practitioners must be aware that children may require help with communication technology<sup>115</sup>.

### Privacy

Finally, some Service personnel commented that where communication infrastructure for phone and internet use was call centre-style, described as similar to airport phone cubicles with numerous stations lined up separated by partitions, which may curtail their ability to communicate openly due to the chances of being overheard in a cubicle<sup>116</sup>. The

106 Durham, S. W. 2015. See above  
107 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
108 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
109 Durham, S. W. 2015. See above.  
110 Durham, S. W. 2015. See above.  
111 Konowitz, S. *Understanding How Army National Guard Families with Children Cope with Deployments*. 2013.  
112 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.  
113 Konowitz, S. 2013. See above.  
114 Konowitz, S. *Understanding How Army National Guard Families with Children Cope with Deployments*. 2013.  
115 Atwood, K. *Maintaining “the Family” During Deployment: Presence Work by Military Families*. 2014  
116 Durham, S. W. (2015). *Service Members' Experiences in Staying Connected With Family While Deployed*. ANS Adv Nurs Sci. 2015; 38(4),



relative privacy of some SM/IBC platform options, when used on personal devices, may therefore be of benefit to Service personnel<sup>117</sup>.

## Communication and managing the impact of deployment on children's wellbeing

The emotional cycle of deployment<sup>118</sup> refers to the differing experience for children of each stage of deployment, and the varying emotional impact this can have. In the following section we consider the impact of SM/IBC communication on children's wellbeing at different stages of this cycle, where the literature comments on this.

### The impact of communication during deployment

There is some evidence that SM/IBC may improve children's wellbeing during the deployment of a parent. A research study carried out in the US suggested that increased communication, inclusive of both SM/IBC and traditional communication methods, was associated with a reduction in emotional and behavioural changes during deployment. This suggests that increased communication buffered negative behavioural changes due to separation and promoted consistency in children's welfare<sup>119</sup>. Additionally, children with more frequent communication with their serving parent reported less symptoms of ambiguous loss (i.e., guilt, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion)<sup>120</sup>. This concept was employed by Boss (2002)<sup>121</sup> to describe the unclear loss experienced by families when their serving person is deployed and therefore physically absent, but psychologically present to a certain extent. As discussed previously, SM/IBC can provide families with increased opportunities for communication, therefore the increase in use of SM/IBC may enable families to capitalise on the positive impact of increased communication on children's wellbeing. Indeed, one reviewed study hypothesised that the reduction in symptoms of ambiguous loss associated with increased communication may be related to the commonplace use of newer communication by children during deployment<sup>122</sup>.

Considering SM/IBC specifically, a US study indicated an association between this type of communication and increased happiness, excitement and security in military children, and a feeling that their deployed parent was still involved<sup>123</sup>. However, alongside

this, children's Facebook use was negatively correlated with depression scores<sup>124</sup>.

UK-based research, however, shows both positive and negative impacts on children's wellbeing during deployment. Indeed, evidence suggests that instant forms of SM/IBC could help children have a better understanding of their parents' role in the military, thereby reducing their worries around parental safety. However, this research also shows that for some children inconsistent access to communication resulting in the loss of calls or the inability to communicate can exacerbate anxiety<sup>125</sup>.

### The impact of communication on post-deployment integration

A small amount of evidence suggests that communication may help to improve family reintegration post-deployment<sup>126 127</sup>. Evidence from the small subset of US children who had a parent recently return from deployment indicates that newer communication technologies may aid children's adjustment during reintegration, with a child commenting "it's not like I never saw them". The small size of this group, only seven children, should prompt caution in the interpretation of the results. Additionally, no association could be found between reintegration outcomes and overall family, parental or child communication (measuring families use of both SM/IBC and traditional communication methods). However, this study did find that difficulty with reintegration was negatively correlated with both video chat use and traditional postal communication<sup>128</sup>.

### Impact of communication on Serving parents' wellbeing

Some research identified in this scoping review discusses the impact of SM/IBC on the serving parent themselves and the potential impact of this on operational readiness.

Indeed, for serving parents, their partial involvement in family life can cause difficulties even with increased access to communication technologies. One serving parent in a US-based study described the challenge of being unable to parent as they would wish from afar, particularly when they were made aware of their child's misbehaviour; "if my kids were acting up, as a father I wanted to be the disciplinarian, but it is difficult from Afghanistan<sup>129</sup>."

UK research describes Naval personnel as "keen users" of social media when available,

279-297

117 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.

118 Logan, K. V. 1987. The emotional cycle of deployment. In US Naval Institute Proceedings (Vol. 113, No. 1, pp. 43-47).

119 Goodney, R. A mixed methods study of technological influences on communication and media exposure in military children experiencing parental deployment. 2014.

120 Goodney, R. 2014. See above.

121 Boss P. Ambiguous loss in families of the missing. The Lancet. 2002 Dec 1;360:s39-40.

122 Goodney, R. 2014. See above.

123 Goodney, R. A mixed methods study of technological influences on communication and media exposure in military children experiencing parental deployment. 2014.

124 Goodney, R. 2014. See above.

125 Children's Commissioner. Kin and Country. 2018.

126 Durham, S. W. Service Members' Experiences in Staying Connected With Family While Deployed. ANS Adv Nurs Sci. 2015; 38(4), 279-297

127 Goodney, R. 2014. See above.

128 Goodney, R. 2014. See above.

129 Durham, S. W. 2015; 38(4), 279-297. See above.



noting sporadic access with personnel in this study only gaining access when close to shore or landed, and discusses two potential challenges with these new technologies: disruption to crew dynamics and tension from competing demand from military and family life<sup>130</sup>. Some participants in the study reported that newer technologies “unsett[ed] existing practises of group socialising”, noting that during down time when there was a connection personnel were less involved in crew socials; “You just see everyone sat around on the Wi-Fi, Facebooking, Skyping, headphones on. All of that takes over. So, you lose a lot of that social side of...sort of de-stressing<sup>131</sup>.” Secondly, some personnel discussed tension arising between their family’s expectations of constant communication, and the demand of military life and their desire to take part in socialising with their crew. One participant relayed their frustration; “When I’m ashore with my mates I want to go to the waterpark or whatever, but it’s almost expected that I will be in contact. I don’t want to be in contact. I’ve got no news to tell”.

Further to this, US-based research found that some Serving personnel felt that increased communication may make it harder for personnel to focus on the task at hand<sup>132</sup>. Whilst this is not solely related to SM/IBC, in light of findings that new communication technologies may help families increase their levels of communication, further research must explore the impact on operational efficiency, and most importantly on Service personnel’s wellbeing.

## Becoming a parent during deployment

One study focused on the unique experience of becoming a parent during deployment and discussed the role of SM/IBC in this experience<sup>133</sup>. One father in this study commented that seeing pictures of their child was the moment they first felt like a father, underscoring the importance of the ability to share pictures which often occurs via social media sites. Both traditional and newer technologies played a role in establishing family bonds and allowed the father to have a role in parenting from a distance. Instant messaging allowed for quick and sporadic conversation during evening/early morning feeds, social media sites aided in easy sharing of photos and stories, and private YouTube videos allowed the serving parent to see key milestones (i.e., like a first bath). Finally, fathers discussed that their partner sharing links to websites about being a new father helped them to feel prepared for reintegrating into their new family<sup>134</sup>.

130 Adey, P., Denney, D., Jensen, R., & Pinkerton, A. *Blurred lines: Intimacy, mobility, and the social military*. Critical Military Studies. 2016; 2(1-2), 7-24.

131 Adey, P., Denney, D., Jensen, R., & Pinkerton, A. *Blurred lines: Intimacy, mobility, and the social military*. Critical Military Studies. 2016; 2(1-2), 7-24.

132 Durham SW. *In their own words: Staying connected in a combat environment*. Military Medicine. 2010; 1175(8):554-9.

133 Schachman, K. A. *Online fathering: The experience of first-time fatherhood in combat-deployed troops*. Nursing Research. 2010; 59(1), 11-17.

134 Schachman, K. A. 2010. See above.

## Summary of findings

- International research focused on military children’s use of SM/IBC for communication during separation from their serving parent is limited
- SM/IBC may be able to address some of the issues associated with more traditional forms of communication, such as working around family schedules and keeping serving parents up-to-date with key family events and milestones
- As with the civilian literature, research generally suggests video synchronous communication has particular benefits, fostering increased feelings of connectedness in military families
- Several practical barriers to using SM/IBC are identified internationally, including varied communication infrastructure and internet connection between deployment locations, and across different Service branches, ranks and roles
  - Naval personnel internationally are highlighted as experiencing the most separation and the most inconsistent access to communication infrastructure
- Other practical challenges highlighted in the literature include difficulty managing time differences, the costs of using mobile data, and communication blackouts
- Military families also report that the increased opportunities to communicate provided by SM/IBC can create additional challenges, including choosing whether to share day-to-day issues and bad news
- Parents also report difficulties engaging children with communication, with younger children easily distracted, and older children often busy with social lives and hobbies
- Increased opportunities for communication provided by SM/IBC appear to be related to better wellbeing in children. However, interruptions in connectivity can exacerbate anxiety
- For serving parents, the competing demands of their role and managing their family’s expectation for communication can be difficult. However, SM/IBC allowed Service personnel to keep updated when parenting from afar, or becoming a parent whilst deployed



## Service family interview and focus group findings

The following section outlines how we carried out the interviews and focus groups with military spouses/partners and children, followed by our findings.

### How did we carry out the interviews and focus groups?

We conducted interviews and focus groups with:

- 25 children of currently serving Naval personnel, aged between 11-21
- 21 non-serving spouses or long-term partners, including those in blended families, of currently serving Naval personnel, who have children under the age of 21

In some cases, both children/young people and their at-home parent participated in this project, allowing us to consider their reported experiences in tandem. 11 parent-child pairs/groups were interviewed, and a comparative analysis of their perspectives is reported separately.

For the focus groups and interviews with Naval children and young people, vignettes were utilised to help facilitate deeper discussion about the experiences of communication during parent-child relationships (Appendix 1). These vignettes were based on 1) a young person's experience of being separated from their serving parent and 2) the experiences of a serving parent separated from their children.

Partner/non-serving parent interviews were semi-structured and focused on the experience of family communication, the main benefits and challenges and how SM/IBC differs from traditional communication, the impact of SM/IBC on Naval children and young people and their relationship with their serving parent, and support or changes that families thought could help improve communication (if any).

All interviews and focus groups were conducted remotely over Microsoft Teams due to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic. Where both parents and their children participated, they were interviewed separately. All spouses/partners were interviewed one on one. Focus groups were held with multiple young people where possible, however due to difficulties in coordinating schedules five children were interviewed one on one.

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed<sup>135</sup>. Quotes reported from these transcripts have been pseudonymised.

More details of how we undertook the interviews/focus groups and analyses can be found in Appendix 2.

135 Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative research in psychology. 2006; 3(2):77-101.

### Sample characteristics

We spoke to 25 Naval children and young people aged between 11 and 21-years-old, who have or have had a parent serving in the Royal Navy, and 21 spouses and partners of current Naval Service personnel with children under 21.

We aimed to capture a diverse range of experience in our sample, including different Naval Services, ranks, dispersed families, separated or blended families. Whilst Royal Marines were eligible to take part in this study, and despite following targeted recruitment for this group, no partners/spouses or children of Royal Marine personnel came forward to take part in this study.

The characteristics of each of the participants in each group are shown in detail in Appendix 4. 13 female and 12 male children and young people were interviewed, spread across Key Stages 3-5 (13 in Key Stage 3, 7 in Key Stage 4, and 5 in Key Stage 5 or above). All bar one spouse/partner interviewed identified as women and all were in male-female couples. One blended family was interviewed, in which the serving parent was a Stepfather. Spouses/partners had children of varied ages (from 5 months to 18 years) and genders. There was a diverse of Service branch and serving family member rank across the sample, shown in more detail Appendix 4.

Quotes in the findings sections below are provided with the corresponding participant number, corresponding to the Tables provided in Appendix 4.

### Findings section 1: How do Service families use social media and internet-based communication during periods of separation?

The international literature suggests that military families use a broad range of SM/IBC, with differing preferences, circumstances and contexts impacting how families utilise this technology.

### Methods of communication

There exists a plethora of SM/IBC tools available to children and parents. All children and young people interviewed used SM/IBC methods to keep in touch with their parents during periods of separation.

Interviews with Naval spouses/partners support this, showing that the use of SM/IBC is widespread and commonplace. All partners and their families use some form of SM/IBC with their serving partner during periods of separation, although for some SM/IBC was infrequent, instead relying on more traditional forms of communication, mainly email and phone calls. Submariner families were severely restricted in their access to communication methods, often limited to family grams<sup>136</sup> and on rare occasions email,

136 Family grams enable families to send 120 words a week to their serving family member whilst on Submarines.



sporadic phone calls and SM/IBC. Despite this, both Submariner families interviewed did attempt to use social media when the crew was in port (alongside), but this was rare, and thus their experience is best characterised as non-users of social media.

A range of different methods of SM/IBC were used across the sample for facilitating parent-child, or wider family communication: Facebook, Facebook Messenger, TikTok, Twitter, Skype, Signal, Facetime, Google Hangout, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

***“We mainly have family group chats, like FaceTime calls. I mean I don’t have like... I did text him privately on Father’s Day. Like we all did separately and then we sent out a package with some like chocolate and things in.” (Young person 8, Female, Aged 15)***

***“Oh, [child] will use WhatsApp to message [serving parent], usually he can’t reply to her because she just sends him videos from YouTube! So, she just tries to send him TikToks constantly, so I don’t think she understands that he can’t open those!” (Partner 6, Surface Fleet).***

The above quotes highlight how families use SM/IBC in creative ways, sharing video content from platforms like TikTok and YouTube via instant messaging services and using expressive forms of communication such as emojis. Although email and text do allow for the use of emojis, one spouse/partner shared their child’s enjoyment of Facebook Messenger’s more immersive use of emojis, which can prompt an animation on screen:

***“My youngest does use, thinking about it, he does use Facebook Messenger to send him messages. He’ll always know when it’s him because he’ll just send him like if you press the heart, it’ll fly up loads of hearts. So, he’ll send him loads of them and he’ll always saying I’m guessing this is our youngest! And then it’ll be like I love you Daddy! And then they’ll have a wall with different hearts, and he giggles and he enjoys that.” Partner 3, Surface Fleet.***

Another example of creative use of social media was a Serving parent using WhatsApp to record and share audio of him reading his children a bedtime story:

***“This time he’s actually brought a book for them... all the children, and he’s recorded his voice on reading the story to him... to them and then sent it via WhatsApp. So, he’s you know... read them a bedtime story in effect.” Partner 11, Surface Fleet***

Outside of communication with their serving parent, many children and young people used SM/IBC to communicate with friends and/or family. Some of this communication took place whilst playing online games, such as Roblox. The use of online games to communicate with serving parents was not seen in our sample, although some children showed interested in this:

***“Yeah, so they’ve both got PlayStations, and they’ve got a PlayStation Live so they can talk to friends and play with friends on there. They’ve both got Switches, tablets, my oldest has got a mobile phone. YouTube, the general... I think that’s about it. Mainly like gaming. Oh, and my oldest uses Zoom for his [Group Activity].” Partner 3, Surface Fleet***

***“I haven’t heard about that game thing actually. That sounds quite good.” (Young person 12, Female, Aged 15).***

However, not all children and young people used, or were allowed to use, social media outside of family communication.

***“No, not really. So, I think possibly because I don’t understand all of it so much, I’ve kind of kept it quite locked-down really. So, they don’t go... they... I might occasionally show them a video on my Facebook of a... or occasionally I might put YouTube on for them to do like a little yoga thing or... but it is very yeah, tightly controlled probably compared to a lot of their peers.” Partner 4, Surface Fleet.***

## Preference for specific social media methods

When the children and young people were prompted to specify their preferred method of SM/IBC, WhatsApp was selected as the preferred tool. The age of the participants did not alter this view, with the majority choosing WhatsApp because of its functionality, including numerous group chats, ease of sending multimedia messages and instant informal messaging.

Using video synchronous communication was also popular, although this was not preferred over instant messaging. Some children and young people commented that they used to use the video call app Skype, but now newer apps such as FaceTime were



preferred. When asked why they preferred 'FaceTime' most felt that it was more personal and enabled them to see their parent face-to-face:

***"It meant he could like show us things and it just... you know it just felt like more of a... more of a personal conversation, I guess. Because you had that chance to actually like physically look at him". (Young person 10, Female, Aged 21)***

Evidence from the partners interviews support a general preference for SM/IBC over traditional methods, with synchronous video communication preferred overall.

***"Communication was definitely better through any sort of face-to-face video conferencing" (Partner 19, Surface Fleet)***

Furthermore, partners were positive about the use of instant messaging methods, such as Facebook messenger and WhatsApp.

***"I think we just like it because now we've got the family WhatsApp it's instant, and you know that everybody in the family can see it straightaway. So, you can sort of... you can share it together as if... as if you are a family altogether. And it's... yeah, it's just a... a system that we... we've used and we like." (Partner 18, Medical Services)***

Our findings indicated a potential disconnect between some parents who prefer traditional media, and children/young people who have grown up with SM/IBC. Several partners/spouses commented on the ease with which their children used SM/IBC, likely due to the prolific and increasing role of SM/IBC in society.

***"I tend to go down phone and email probably because of my age! You know the... it tends to be more my natural choice I'm not going to deny it." (Partner 1, Surface Fleet)***

***"I think it's just, you know, the age that they're growing up in now. And... it's part of who they are." (Partner 2, Fleet Air Arm)***

Furthermore, what is shared between young people and their serving parent was in some cases dependent on the serving parents' preference for traditional communication methods:

***"My dad isn't a big social media person anyway so like he didn't... he doesn't like use Facebook and stuff. So... it's not like we could really communicate with him through that kind of medium". (Young person 10, Female, Aged 21)***

## Frequency of communication

Frequency of SM/IBC use varied significantly between the families interviewed. Partners' comments ranged from communication every day to periods of several weeks without communication, often linked to where they were currently located or their ability to access the internet. This was evident in several interviews with spouses/partners:

***"It can be really sporadic. Really hit and miss, dependent on where they are..." (Partner 17, Surface Fleet)***

***"Yeah, it's every day. Obviously, there's sometimes like a couple of hours gaps" (Partner 8, Surface Fleet)***

The organic nature of the semi-structure interview and focus groups undertaken meant that it was difficult in places to distinguish between traditional vs SM/IBC when considering frequency. Frequency was inevitably associated with access to SM/IBC methods, with several spouses/partners highlighting this, which is discussed in more detail in the section: [\*\*Factors impacting access to social media and internet-based communication.\*\*](#)

***"At the moment we're trying to kind of video call perhaps most days or kind of every few days because he tends to be away at sea and then back in the evenings where he is. So, we're probably talking about him and video calling him most of the time." (Partner 4, Surface Fleet)***

Discussion with spouses/partners also highlighted variability of frequency during the same deployment, and between different deployments, due to the location and nature of the deployment (i.e., ship vs land-based):

***"No, last deployment he was land based. And that was easier for him to FaceTime every day. So, this time we kind of knew that he wouldn't be able to... or very rarely." (Partner 20, Fleet Air Arm)***

***“Yeah, so like he was on the ship off the coast of the [Location] recently and he was able to call every day. Sometimes it might be every other day or every three days. But yeah, at the moment I can’t even remember the last... oh the [DATE] which was my son’s birthday was the last time we FaceTimed him. So that’s yeah, a week ago now... almost.” (Partner 2, Fleet Air Arm)***

## Summary of findings

- The use of a wide variety of social media and internet-based technologies is common amongst Naval children/young people and spouses/partners, for communication with their serving family member during separation
- There was a preference for using WhatsApp due to its broad functionality (i.e., group chats, sharing photos) and video call applications that enable face-to-face contact
- Submariner families, however, are severely restricted in their ability to utilise this method of communication during deployment
- The frequency with which families used SM/IBC to communicate with their serving family member was varied, depending on deployment location and access to the internet
- The ease with which children and young people were able to use social media for communication was evident, as most have grown up using internet-based technology

## Findings section 2: How can social media and internet-based communication facilitate communication in Naval families?

Partners discussed differences between traditional communication and SM/IBC (i.e., the immediacy and access to video-based options) in the facilitation of communication with their serving family member, which were closely related to the positive experiences families discussed.

### Availability and ease of social media and internet-based communication

Partners commented on the ease of SM/IBC and its ability to facilitate regular communication with their serving partner. This was often associated with its immediacy, for example, the ability to send short and quick messages (i.e., little and often), compared to the longer messages expected via email and other more traditional methods of communication:

***“It’s a lot easier to WhatsApp and everything... and like with WhatsApp you just send lots of little messages and... just send a message whenever. Whereas with emailing it’s obviously... you send one big message and try and get it all out and you know that you’re probably only going to get one or two messages that day. Whereas WhatsApp you’re messaging throughout the entire day constantly!” (Partner 6, Surface Fleet)***

Children and young people reiterated this point. Indeed, those who were old enough to remember back to a time when SM/IBC was less accessible noted how much easier it is to stay in contact with their serving parent now.

***“So there was less communication and also because it was a while ago the... the technology wasn’t as great as well. So we were lucky when he went away last year because you know phones, tablets, whatever, Wi-Fi, like all the time so... it was a lot easier to stay in contact” (Young person 12, Female, Aged 15).***

### Maintaining the parent-child relationship, and the role of immediacy

Serving parents can be away on deployment for long periods of time, which can impact on parent-child relationships. However, the regular ability to communicate can support these 'long distance' relationships. This was evidenced by instances in which regular



communication was not possible. Several children and young people had sympathy for those who had a serving parent on a Submarine, who had little opportunity to communicate:

**'I feel bad... I do feel really... like horrible and like upset for the people that have parents on Submarines because there is no contact with them' (Young person 12, Female, Aged 15).**

Despite being able to make use of video calls with their serving parent, children and young people still talked about how they had changed whilst their serving parent was away and worried about whether their parent would recognise them:

**"When he comes back, oh will he recognise me? Especially me because I change quite a lot...you forget how his voice sounds" (Young person 12, Female, Aged 15).**

Children and young people were acutely aware of what they were missing out on in their parent-child relationship, which was clearly painful to talk about. They were also aware of the impact this has on the at-home parent, often left behind with young children. Some children have used coping mechanisms to protect themselves claiming:

**'It's ok, its ok, so I'll just like... out of sight, out of mind' (Young person 1, Female, Aged 14).**

Children and young people shared feelings of jealousy when they saw their friends with their serving parent or saw celebrations of Father's Day on Instagram. Although SM/IBC cannot replicate face-to-face contact and support from a parent, it is vital in helping to maintain the 'closeness' and minimise the adverse impact of separation on parent-child relationships.

**'It was always like everyone else had all their parents... both their parents or their dads come and pick them up, and then it was always just my mum.' (Young person 10, Female, Aged 17).**

Children and young people spoke about using social media to involve their parent in their day-to-day life and routine. They spoke of sharing photographs of things they had done and asking their serving parent to help them with their homework. This allowed

the serving parent to be involved in their child's schooling and gave them the opportunity to 'parent at a distance'.

**"If we went away or something for the day or like gone for a walk and there's like a nice sunset, like share... send him a picture or like... especially when you were like video call and WhatsApp you would talk about like your day, like that was really nice when even just messaging, just talk about how your day was. And then kind of like my dad's really good at maths, so when I didn't know what any of my maths homework was, I... it was always message Dad 'do you know how to do this?' And then he'd be like 'yeah, of course, I'll FaceTime you quickly!' And it [LAUGH] it was like a quick little catch-up with Dad to do maths! [LAUGH]" (Young person 12, Female, Aged 15)**

Several partners/spouses emphasised that a key difference with SM/IBC compared to traditional methods of communication is the sense of immediacy. This sense of immediacy and instant connection was felt in both communications that were simultaneous, for example real-time video calls, and in trading instant messages via apps such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger.

**"I think social media is more immediate, so something you can quickly ask a question or reach out about... get an answer back or something or an update... so you feel you're in real-time. That's the best way to describe it. That's why I think... that's where its strength is" (Partner 16, Fleet Air Arm).**

Young people who were old enough to recall a period prior to SM/IBC noted the benefits of its immediate nature. They remembered a time when they could only communicate with their serving parent by letters which 'would take months'.

Partners/spouses discussed how the increased connectivity of families via SM/IBC allowed them to share regular updates of their children and young person's development via videos or pictures with ease.

**I do consciously try and upload more when he's away so that he gets the story of what we are doing on a daily basis, and how the boys are changing while he's away as well. Because particularly you know my two-year-old, when Daddy left he wasn't really talking very much. He's going to come home in ten days times and actually he's starting to string words together and communicating much more. So, unless he has that sort of regular updates he's going to come back and**

***just not understand where his children are at.” (Partner 2, Fleet Air Arm).***

Additionally, they used video calls to enable the Serving person to be present at special milestones, such as moving to university, special events or to just be together as a family in a virtual space.

***“On the weekend that I’d moved a son into university ... and I could take the phone and sort of scan the room and he could talk to [child] and see exactly what is going on... like he was with me and dropping him off” . (Partner 2, Fleet Air Arm).***

Whilst this report cannot claim to evidence a causal association between SM/IBC and reintegration outcomes, partners commented on how these regular updates helped the serving parent to understand the changes that had occurred at home whilst they were separated, which in turn may help ease family reintegration upon return.

The immediate connection also allowed partners to keep their serving person up-to-date on the day-to-day of family life and receive quick answers to everyday questions, allowing them to manage household and daily activities more easily, which can be a significant challenge during periods of separation.

***“Yeah, just getting answers to questions and things and you know... we have a joint bank account, so you know just sorting out money and things. It’s been a lot easier to communicate about that. It’s much... as you... as we would if he was at work and you know checked in his lunchbreak or whatever, it’s the same sort of thing. So... yeah, we can stay in touch a lot better, and you know get an answer straightaway instead of waiting until the end of the week.” (Partner 11, Surface Fleet)***

Further to this, one spouse/partner discussed how the ability to send immediate and frequent messages helped ease the pressure of remembering to update their serving partner thoroughly compared with previous patterns of weekly phone calls.

***“Yeah, so I think the main benefits was that... as long as he was in his room or somewhere where there was Wi-Fi that you could contact them immediately, so you were immediately a part of their life rather than having to be like, right we’re going to phone on a Sunday night, we’re all going to sit around, because it takes away the pressure of needing to tell them something, because you could just tell them almost straightaway. Or if you***

***can’t tell them straightaway, we also enjoyed using the WhatsApp recording so you can record a message.” (Partner 15, Surface Fleet)***

Whilst most of the discussion around immediate and instant connection was SM/IBC technologies, one partner commented on how they experienced this via email.

***“We can communicate via email and it’s very instant. And I guess just that instant communication is brilliant because you can... keep connected to somebody even though they’re on the other side of the world.” (Partner 4, Surface Fleet)***

This highlights the blurred boundaries between the newer SM/IBC that this report focuses on and email, which is also internet-facilitated, and how they share some benefits despite SM/IBC providing additional specific benefits for some Serving families. Families therefore benefit from the choice of having these additional newer methods alongside other traditional methods, giving them the opportunity to capitalise on the benefits of all in the way that works best for them.

## Video-based communication

A significant difference between traditional communication and SM/IBC that was highlighted by participants is the ability to communicate via video. This is facilitated by an increasing number of software applications, such as but not limited to Skype, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, FaceTime and Instagram.

During deployment and separation, there is both a physical and emotional distance between a child and their serving parent. However, that ‘distance’ can play a part in providing a space to communicate and drive what information is shared. One young person shared how they find it easier to talk when they are not physically ‘face-to-face’ and added that being able to speak on FaceTime is easier.

***“I personally find when I’m not directly in front of someone, I find it easier to speak to them. Because if I was in front of you now I wouldn’t be talking this confidently at all. So, like... [LAUGH] When I was on like a FaceTime call with my dad it was easier to kind of like say the things and like I wouldn’t feel necessarily like... not saying awkwardness, but I wouldn’t feel like I had anything to hide as such. But yeah, I wouldn’t always share everything.” (Young person 12, Female, Aged 15)***



This suggests that communicating through a video call app such as FaceTime, from a 'distance' made them feel more confident and less awkward in sharing their feelings, and allowed the child/young person to determine what they wanted to share with their parent. This potentially represents a benefit of SM/IBC over and above its role in maintaining a relationship with their parent during separation.

One young person, was able to recall when FaceTime was not available and Skype was used for any 'face-to-face' conversations; she explained that even though Skype was challenging due to the poor Wi-Fi, she still preferred the 'face-to-face element' in comparison to a phone call:

***'I think I'd preferred the Skype even though it was challenging, just because it felt like you had more of a face-to-face conversation for sure.'* (Young person 10, Female, Aged 21)**

SM/IBC has increased the amount of contact serving parents can have with their children, and children and young people spoke about the importance of such regular contact. However, they also spoke about saying goodbye at the end of a video call, and how this made them miss their parent even more. That moment of contact through SM/IBC, although clearly welcome, raised emotions due to the extended separation between the parent and the child.

From the perspective of the spouses/partners, a prominent benefit of video communication was its ability to engage young people in communication with their serving parent. This is key as spouses/partners commented on the challenging nature of getting young children to engage with and sustain interest in having a conversation with their serving parent at a distance, with both traditional and SM/IBC communication. This theme seems more apparent in the younger children in our sample.

***"When they were little, a lot younger, it was more difficult to get them to talk. That you know they didn't really understand that he was there on the end of the phone and couldn't see him or see them sort of thing."* (Partner 12, Surface Fleet)**

***"For them the video element is much easier for them to communicate because my son is constantly like where are you Daddy? You know he wants to see where he is. And it's helpful for then Daddy to speak to the boys as well because he can see what they're doing and ask questions. So particularly for the younger children, the video calling is so much better than audio calling. So yeah, video calling if we can, if not audio calling, but it's really hard work with little ones."* (Partner 2, Fleet Air Arm)**

However, for both younger children and young people, this is not a fix all solution to the challenge of engaging children in communication with their serving parent. It is important to note that four spouses/partners highlighted the difficulties they experience in getting older children to engage with video calls and characterised teenage interactions with Serving parents as brief, reiterating the importance of SM/IBC in maintaining the parent-children relationship during separation for younger children in particular.

***"If it was a forced conversation, oh come and talk to your dad! It would normally be like... well typical teenage... 'Alright?', 'Yeah, fine, yeah.', 'Good day?', 'Yeah, yeah, fine.', 'What did you eat?', 'Oh Uh.' You know so [SIGH]"* (Partner 15, Surface Fleet)**

Further to this, spouses/partners discussed how being able to see their serving person via video calls helped them and their children to alleviate anxieties around their loved one's safety.

***"No, I think because it's a video call, he can see that he's there and that he's ok. I think he worries that he's... you know if anything pops up on the news or... you know if he hears anything, he's like oh... you know is he ok? Is he doing, ok? And I'm like yeah, yeah, he's fine. So, I think it kind of puts him at ease a bit."* (Partner 8, Surface Fleet)**

In addition to the benefits of video-based communication, spouses/partners commented on how the personal nature of SM/IBC (both video-based and Instant Messaging) helped foster a more genuine connection, as if the serving person were at home.

***"I think with a video it's more, like, it's personal, isn't it? I know a phone call is... can be personal, but it's more you're seeing somebody, you're seeing a reaction on a face ... I mean to start with you haven't got a screen or... you know there's nothing personal."* (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)**

***"I think it's just having that connection to him still and even though he's not here with us, it makes him feel a bit like he is."* (Partner 8, Surface Fleet)**

## Summary of findings

- Children/young people and spouses/partners discussed the benefits of SM/IBC, including the ease of use and immediacy/instant connection facilitated by these technologies, in comparison to traditional methods of communication (i.e., letters, phone calls)
- Children and young people were aware of how important it was to maintain their relationship with their serving parent during separation, and the parent-child experiences they were missing out on compared to their peers
- Young people and spouses/partners highlighted the opportunities that SM/IBC provided in involving serving parents in their children's day-to-day lives (i.e., sharing photos, regular updates) and maintaining the parent-child relationship
- The face-to-face contact facilitated by video-based applications (i.e., FaceTime, WhatsApp video, Skype) was seen as a specific benefit of SM/IBC, and its ability to engage younger children in communication with their serving parent was highlighted in particular. Furthermore, older children discussed the benefits of video communication in helping them share things with their serving parent that they might not feel comfortable sharing face-to-face

## Findings section 3: What challenges are associated with social media and internet-based communication for military families?

In addition to the positives of using SM/IBC, children, young people and spouses/partners reported numerous challenges. Whilst some of these challenges were common to both traditional and SM/IBC, our data suggests that SM/IBC presents unique practical access challenges, which can have a negative emotional impact on Naval children and young people. Additionally, a family's expectations for communication may change with the increased avenues for communication that SM/IBC methods afford.

### Factors impacting access to social media and internet-based communication

Whilst (as discussed above) families appreciated the increased opportunities for communication that SM/IBC affords, access to SM/IBC can present significant practical and emotional challenges for families.

### Quality of connection

The issue of Wi-Fi access was consistently raised as an issue for all the children and young people we spoke to: *"connection is the big thing for communication"* (Young person 21, Male, Aged 17). Parents supported this, discussing issues experienced with Service personnel's ability to gain and maintain a stable internet connection. Difficulty accessing a stable connection meant that sometimes video calls were not possible, and as such families could not capitalise on the unique benefits of video-based communication outlined above. In addition to this, other forms of communication that require significant data consumption via personal devices, such as watching video shared on TikTok, Instagram or via an instant messaging service, might not be possible.

***"We don't get them on the ship, he can never... the Wi-Fi won't withhold a video call. It's only if they're alongside. The ship Wi-Fi doesn't seem... we've tried before, but it just messes up." (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)***

***"Well, the Wi-Fi on ship just can't open the videos. So, he can't really watch them." Partner 6, Surface Fleet)***

Additionally, the reliability of the internet connection at home must be taken into consideration when exploring what is needed to facilitate effective SM/IB communication. One spouse/partner commented that the internet provision in Service family accommodation can be low quality and thus present its own issues.



***“It’s unpredictable as in how good your Wi-Fi is because if you’ve gone Service family accommodation... you’re given what you’re given. You know you might have decent speed, you might not. And if you’ve got patchy speed, etcetera... it has a knock-on”. (Partner 1, Surface Fleet)***

## Competition for access

Associated with quality of internet connection, partners discussed how the competition for Wi-Fi bandwidth for those based on ship can limit their ability to use SM/IBC effectively.

***“Right, so the social media... is very, very, very rare because he doesn’t have access to it really. Not much Wi-Fi, so he’s on one of the aircraft carriers. So, there’s not much Wi-Fi there, but you’ve got a lot of people trying to get onto the Wi-Fi so he doesn’t bother.” (Partner 5, Surface Fleet)***

***“Only that it can be intermittent, the Wi-Fi. It’s not sturdy enough, which you’d expect it not to be sturdy, you know. But I think it’s more so because there’s so many people trying to access the same internet.” (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)***

To combat this, some spouses/partners shared their tactic of avoiding times at which they knew there would be increased competition for Wi-Fi, planning to communicate when it was quiet and thus the internet connection more stable. However, this can impact on family’s ability to communicate when this does not align well with the schedules and routines of those back home.

***“Because they’ve just got into port and literally seven hundred people trying to use the same Wi-Fi connection. So if she times it right, and let everyone do their stuff to begin with, you know download all their messages and emails. Then actually it’s pretty stable, it’s pretty strong and we can have a good conversation.” (Partner 21, Surface Fleet)***

***“Unfortunately, with the time delay interference if he’s three or four hours often to make sure the ship is quiet enough that the bandwidth is broad enough, he might not be speaking to me till two maybe one o’clock in the morning to make sure everyone else is in bed.” (Partner 17, Surface Fleet)***

## Impact of occupational role

Children/young people and spouses/partners reported that their serving family member’s access to Wi-Fi or cellular data, and therefore their access to SM/IBC, varied depending on their role.

Unsurprisingly, Submariner families reported a very different communication experience to other Naval families, whose serving family member served as part of the Fleet Air Arm or Surface Fleet. Submariners’ access to communication, including both SM/IBC and traditional routes, is severely restricted due to the nature of their deployments. The main method used to contact their serving person was family grams. Dependant on the class of Submarine their serving person was deployed on (Vanguard, Astute, Dreadnaught, or Trafalgar), partners commented that their serving person may be able to access email which facilitated two-way communication, unlike family grams. However, this access was sporadic:

***“Then over the last sort of few years the [Submarine classification] did start to get email capabilities. But that was very hit and miss, so like the first week into a patrol that system broke down and then we had nothing! Other patrols it’s just... it’s whenever they can get near enough to the surface to put a mast up to send and receive emails that are all sat waiting. But one patrol he did, we did get sort of an email once a week which was quite nice.” (Partner 13, Submarine Fleet)***

Families referenced the infrequent opportunities some had to call home if surfaced.

***“Occasionally they would surface, they would be able to call. But they might only surface for like a few hours and in that time, they’d have to get like 120 people up onto the casing and take turns to call home.” (Partner 13, Submarine Fleet).***

Considering SM/IBC specifically, use of these methods by Submariner families was rare. With both Submariner families using SM/IBC very infrequently, limited to the work up period (i.e., the short phase of land-based preparation for deployment) or if the Submariner was in port (i.e., alongside).

***“The only time was that year and a half one when they came off occasionally to get fuel. But that was unusual.” (Partner 14, Submarine Fleet)***



The sample size of Submariner families (i.e., two spouses/partners and 2 children interviewed) is too small to allow us to comment on the experience of using SM/IBC for Submariners in general. In the infrequent instances of video-based communication discussed by spouses/partners during the deployment period, both facilitated by Skype, partners describe how these calls were upsetting due to the disruption to their routine, having settled into not receiving communication from their Serving parent. One partner commented that not utilising this method of communication was preferable due to the negative impact:

***When they were younger, they found it really hard if he went alongside somewhere for a few days and he would Skype and then... you know they... they'd see Daddy on the... on the laptop and they'd be like well why isn't Daddy here? Like why is Daddy there? Why can't we see Daddy? And it's really disruptive because you get into a routine, you get them settled and they're coping and then... it just upsets the balance and then you've got to almost start all over again for the next couple of months while they're still gone. So certainly... it sounds awful, but not hearing from him is... is better. Yeah! (Partner 13, Submarine fleet)***

Additionally, potential unique access challenges for SM/IBC were highlighted for those who work within the Naval Medical Services, due to their role taking them to "very, very remote places". Additionally, a spouse/partner whose serving partner was in this type of role discussed the heightened frequency of communication blackouts they can face, as "being hospital-based, communication was nearly always down... when there was casualties or fatalities". It must be noted, however, that only one family attached to the medical Services was present in our sample, therefore this significantly limits the generalisability of this finding and further exploration is needed to understand how communication experiences vary by specific role.

## Impact of Rank

Several spouses spoke of how a serving person's rank impacts access to traditional communication routes, such as email and satellite phone calls, noting how those in higher ranks can have increased access to phones and computers often in their cabin. The partner of a commissioned Naval service person commented

***"He does have you know more accessibility to things! As opposed to the other sailors that might be on-board. So, you know... the bonus of him being at the top of tree as... you know it's easier for us definitely".***

Whilst rank does not appear to directly impact access to SM/IBC routes, interviews revealed the indirect impact that rank can have. Some spouses/partners of more senior personnel discussed their Serving partner's choice to limit their use of SM/IBC to reduce the competition for Wi-Fi/internet connection with more junior ranks, in the knowledge that they had increased access to traditional methods, such as email and phone:

***"Because he could email all the time, he felt it was more important for the younger people who didn't have access to their emails every day to be able to go and use the Wi-Fi. So, he would just go and send me an email and other people were getting WhatsApps and things like that. So, they did... there was opportunities, but he just didn't do it" (Partner 12, Surface Fleet)***

***"I think he's right that you know there's other people on the ship and they're trying to use the Wi-Fi and they have less access to computers than him, they've less access to phones and they've got to queue up for them. And he's got quite free access, so I can understand why he might leave off it a bit to leave some bandwidth for other people." (Partner 5, Surface Fleet)***

## Impact of deployment location

Whether or not a Serving person was on land-based or ship-based deployment inevitably impacted their access to SM/IBC. Spouses/partners commented how land-based deployments often had better access to Wi-Fi or mobile data facilitating SM/IBC communication.

***"Last deployment he was land-based. And that was easier for him to FaceTime every day." (Partner 20, Fleet Air Arm)***

However, this was not the case for all families, with one partner who experienced deployments in more remote location describing land-based access as "exceptionally poor" (Partner 18, Medical Services).

Wi-Fi access on ship was characterised as unreliable, with some reporting a reliance on personal mobile data to contact home.

***"Yeah, it's just random really, I couldn't really say... the trouble is when they're... actually sailing... they haven't got very good connectivity." (Partner***



## 11, Surface Fleet)

One partner highlighted the variation by ship, “with the other ships... as far as I’m aware the Wi-Fi is... is not as good as it is on the main carrier” (Partner 21, Surface Fleet). However, instances of good Wi-Fi connection on ship were also evident, highlighting the variability of experience.

**“It’s actually pretty good at the moment. He’s usually got the Wi-Fi on so we’re always on WhatsApp talking that way. He gets lots of pictures of the kids and everything and he’s able to receive those.” (Partner 6, Surface Fleet)**

Several families commented on how Wi-Fi access was better when the ship was docked, therefore supporting the above discussion that land-based access to SM/IBC is more reliable.

**“So when... when they do get alongside, we do WhatsApp video message because Wi-Fi is obviously a little bit stronger.” (Partner 21, Surface Fleet)**

**“Last time he was alongside for a week, and he did ring [WhatsApp video call] me every day that week” (Partner 6, Surface Fleet)**

Additionally, the impact of Covid-19 on the Navy’s deployment schedules was referenced by a few spouses/partners, who commented that the reduced frequencies of stops in port and limitation placed on crews meant some families lost opportunities to capitalise on the better access when the ship was docked in port, alongside.

**“Yeah, depending on whether he’s in port or not, at the moments it’s obviously touch and go with Covid. Slots are being put aside or lost. So actual FaceTime calls are relatively limited at the minute” . (Partner 9, Fleet Air Arm)**

**“We do speak to [serving person] when she’s alongside and as it’s the carrier and due to the pandemic, they haven’t really been alongside that often to be honest with you.” (Partner 21, Surface Fleet)**

## Operational security and communication blackouts

Both young people and spouses/partners commented on how communication blackouts for security or casualty-related reasons curtail communication via both

traditional and SM/IBC methods.

**“Well, the ship my dad’s on now they’ve lost communication. So, they’re not able to like speak to us.” (Young person 6, Male, Aged 12)**

The extent to which families in this study experienced blackouts varied considerably, with some families experiencing minimal blackouts with few or singular incidents in the course of their partners’ service, and others experiencing blackouts multiple times a week; “at the moment... this past week, it’s probably been... every other day” (Partner 20, Fleet Air Arm). The length of blackouts varied also from a couple of hours or a few days, up to 2 weeks.

Children and young people spoke of the negative impact blackouts have on them, describing how they would cut off mid-conversation and then not receive any more communication for weeks. They described feeling ‘hurt’, ‘worried’, ‘isolated’, ‘anxious’ and ‘frustrated’:

**“They have to hang up suddenly and we lose communication altogether, that’s happened a few times with my dad. So, we’d be halfway... so it’s either he would email us and then we’d get an email about four weeks later saying sorry we had to turn everything off altogether. Or he rang us once which was odd when he wasn’t at a port and they lost... like his phone just completely went, they lost all signal. So, we were talking to him and we... suddenly and then it just went. But I was about nine or ten, so that really hurt.” (Young person 5, Female, Aged 17)**

Some children and young people showed understanding about the reasons for these blackouts but still had to ‘reassure’ themselves that nothing was wrong, with one young person noting:

**“I do have to reassure myself they are in the middle of the sea, they’re not always going to have connection. So, it’s just kind of thinking about the positives.” (Young person 8, Female, Aged 15)**

Partners also discussed the challenges blackouts can bring for their children, discussing how the experience can foster anxiety. Additionally, spouses/partners shared the challenges that blackouts present for children who want to share a special event or

milestone.

***“But it can be difficult especially if the boys... you know I’ve got [the] boys very close together and if they’ve passed an exam, like doing A levels, AS levels, GCSEs and they want to tell their dad... not always feasible.” (Partner 17, Surface Fleet)***

Furthermore, blackouts can further impact on children’s routines, as families feel as though they must take the opportunity to communicate whenever possible, even when inconvenient:

***“I got used to it because I knew it wasn’t his fault, it was you know something had happened at work... or even just you know Wi-Fi, everything had gone down. I think the hardest thing was for the children because when they were little, when my son was about four... John used to ring and the problem is he would just ring when he could. So sometimes it would be for us the most inconvenient time ever.” (Partner 18, Medical Services)***

Some spouses/partners commented that they did not feel overly concerned when experiencing communication blackouts. The routine nature of communication blackouts for Service families was evident when they were discussed. One spouse/partner expressed their understanding that no communication is preferable to getting a knock on the door.

***“It’s my character. I don’t worry. I mean people used to say to me... civilian people used to say to me ‘Oh my God, you must be so worried, you know he’s always in a war zone’. And I just said to them if I worried about that, you know I’d never be able to cope in life. So... I must admit I would almost blank it, and I know if anything awful had happened, I would be communicated with very quickly.” (Partner 18, Medical Services)***

However, for some spouses/partners communication blackouts prompted feelings of anxiety or panic, particularly for those with less experience of deployments.

***“And in that moment, when I... you know I was still early days of being a military spouse or partner, and I didn’t really understand the protocols of the families would get informed before the media. So, we were all panicking***

***ourselves going ‘oh my God, is it him? Is it him?’ And when we were able to speak to him, he was like ‘no you... you would have been told before the media’. But at the point in time, you just... you do just go into panic mode.” (Partner 2, Fleet Air Arm)***

One partner shared the challenges of a blackout coinciding with a difficult period at home following the death of a family member. They spoke of the challenges of grieving whilst unable to speak with their serving partner, who struggled with not being able to call home when needed.

***“So, it’s something he’s used to. And really felt he needed to phone home and was told... you know you’re not allowed.” (Partner 17, Surface Fleet)***

## **Emotional impact of unreliable social media and internet-based communication**

The unreliable access to and quality of SM/IBC has the potential to provoke emotional reactions for Naval children and young people. When speaking of being cut off mid-conversation and not being able to reconnect for a couple of days, some young people demonstrated an understanding of this, accepting that it was just due to the connection and that there was nothing they could do. Two young people talked about how they did not mind this loss in contact, they had got used to it. However, the other young people talked about the feelings the loss of contact caused them, citing anxiety, worry, sadness, isolation and hurt.

***“It was the fact that (umm) I didn’t have a clue where he was and then it all of a sudden just cut out. That was... yeah, that wasn’t fun!” (Young person 4, Male, Aged 15)***

***“it’s not working so... and I remember it used to upset me because I was like oh I can’t like speak to him properly. So, I mean... in a way it was almost like of worse” (Young person 6, Male, Aged 12)***

Although the immediacy of SM/IBC can be a positive, when a response is not immediately received, this can add to young people’s worries. For example, when communicating via WhatsApp, young people can see whether their parent has read their message and any lack of response can make young people worry.

***“With the communication, worrying about when you don’t get any message back.” (Young person 6, Male, Aged 12)***

***“with like the messaging and if there’s problems with signals you kind of don’t know what’s happened or if everything’s ok” (Young person 13, Female, Aged 15).***

Sometimes the quality of video-based communication could be poor, due to poor signal. Young people talked about this type of communication “almost not being worth it” (Young person 10, Female, aged 21) because they could not see their parent clearly or hear what was being said.

Partners agreed that the access and availability-related challenges of SM/IBC can have an emotional impact on their children. In most instances where upset was discussed parents characterised this as temporary.

***“My youngest, he nearly started crying when he’d seen him for the first time in ages, he was just like... he just didn’t know what to say to him when he’d seen him... the whole video call he didn’t... couldn’t speak to him. He was just like nodding and shaking his head. And then within about an hour my youngest said oh I want to speak to Daddy. So, I sent him a message and the video called, and he was fine, he sat there like everything was normal again.” (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)***

***“She doesn’t understand is when it freezes, when Mummy doesn’t respond straightaway and there’s a time lag that’s when she goes into a bit of a... a bit of a sort of yeah, she gets depressed and starts crying and when we’ve been cut-off a few times, but luckily, we’ve reconnected. So... and then obviously straight afterwards when we’ve done the call, you know she’s pressed the button and said ‘Bye’ and... then in floods of tears for five minutes and then it’s a bit of chocolate in front of them and they’re ok.” (Partner 21, Surface Fleet)***

Additionally, some discussed the negative impact this can have on the Serving person due to their disappointment and frustration at not being able to connect well with home:

***You know you freeze, and you repeat... sounding like... so my husband’s last deployment in [Deployment Location] he would quite often go to an internet***

***café and then it would freeze and he’d do that and restart the computer like three times and then the boys would be off because they’d lost interest! And then Daddy’s sitting in [Deployment Location] quite disappointed that he hasn’t spoken to his children!”***

***(Partner 19, Surface Fleet)***

## Time differences and pressures

Time differences and the busy nature of Naval life constitutes a significant barrier to communication. Young people spoke about how challenging it can be to coordinate a time to speak to their serving parent:

***“I know they’re very busy all the time, so I don’t always get my hopes up. And then when they do ring or they do message, it’s a little bit of excitement.”***

***(Young person 5, Male, Aged 15)***

In the best examples, the serving parent was able to identify specific days and times they would be available to talk, and the family would try to fit around them, but the type and location of deployment could make this challenging. The availability of the serving parent could also be a significant challenge when they were serving in a different time zone.

***“Like especially like when my dad went away, the time difference was massive, it’s like we would have to call him at like nine o’clock at night and it would only be... he would have just finished work, so it’d be like three o’clock/ four o’clock.” (Young person 12, Female, Aged 15)***

***“The biggest challenge is... and this comes into the fact that there’s children involved as well, is the fact that they’re kind of two or three hours ahead. So, our timings never really sort of link up very well because by the time he’s finished work or has a gap, it tends to be when I’m in the busiest part of the kind of evening and trying to get the girls sorted for dinner and bath and bed and... so, the timings don’t work out” (Partner 4, Surface Fleet)***

Children and young people noted inconsistency in the time of day that their serving parent was able to contact them and said that their serving parent would often be available to talk when they were either just about to leave for school, or just about to go to bed.

***“He’s constantly doing... doing stuff so he’s not always the most available on any day (Young person 20, Male, Aged 15)***

Partners elaborated on the difficulty aligning home routine with the busy schedules of their serving person whilst navigating this time difference. They described having to take calls at inconvenient times that could be disruptive to daily routines, for example dinner, bath, and bedtime. In some cases, this could have an impact on family routines beyond the duration of the call. For example, one partner described how calls before bed can put her children into “*awake mode*” as they’ve been talking excitedly to their father and running to show him things on camera, making bedtime more challenging.

Difficulty managing busy schedules and time zones were compounded during term time for school-aged children and young people, as this limited the potential hours available for communication. Where schools were supportive, the use of both SM/IBC and traditional communication helped families adapt to this barrier.

***“That’s why my son got a tablet in school, so that if he needs to ring, but he can’t ring when they’re home, he can contact them still during school time. It was a prior arrangement we made with the school. So, the tablets in my son’s class at all times on with Signal. And my oldest has got a mobile phone, so I’ve already just said to the school that I want him to be able to answer, but we’ve planned as well that he will try and give at least twelve hours or twenty-four hours’ notice” (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)***

***“So, I’ve been using nursery and the school because [child] goes to pre-school in the morning, so they’ve been accepting video calls and all sorts. So, it’s worked really well.” (Partner 21, Surface Fleet)***

It is important to note that the lack of the serving parent’s availability was directly linked to increasing feelings of isolation and worry around the safety of their serving parent. They also spoke about their worry when they missed a call from the serving parent and could then not get back through to them. Young people also acknowledged the stress this could cause their serving parent.

***“...he tried calling me and I couldn’t answer and then I couldn’t call back. So like... and that was like you know a small window frame that you could talk to and then like I think that probably... like it worried me that I couldn’t then call back, because I think it was like a few minutes late and I think he probably had that stress of like knowing that I’m going to be really distraught over not being able to speak to him and worried about what’s going on...” (Young***

***person 21, Female, Aged 20)***

The need to be able to connect to their parent, even if is a short instant message, reduces stress and worry in children. Although some serving parents were able to give some form of indication when they had availability, most children we spoke to did not know when their serving parent would be available.

## Changed expectations for communication

As discussed previously, Naval families face significant variability in their access to SM/IBC both during the span of a single deployment, and between differing deployments. Due to these inconsistencies, families may find themselves experiencing both good and poor access to SM/IBC. Spouses/partners spoke of how their expectations for what communication would be available had changed as a result of the rise of SM/IBC, with one spouse/partner commenting on how they miss the option of SM/IBC when it is not available, referring the benefits of its immediacy when managing day-to-day life back home.

***“Well, you know looking back through... from you know when I first met my husband, we wouldn’t ever have anything like that. So, I never expected any communication. So of course, now that does happen on some deployments, and at some other time you then expect it all of the time.” (Partner 19, Surface Fleet)***

***“Interviewer: But do you find yourself missing having that as an option compared with a land-based deployment?”***

***Participant: Yes, because there’s so many things that I would just ask him like “why is the dishwasher beeping at me three times? It’s coming up with a fault”. Whereas I would normally just WhatsApp him or FaceTime him and say what’s going on? Whereas now obviously I can’t so it’s... another thing to add to the list that I’ve got to do!” (Partner 20, Fleet Air Arm)***

## Privacy

Due to the layout of the ship and the locations where Wi-Fi is available, two partners commented on the lack of privacy their Serving person experienced when communicating with home in communal spaces. Indeed, one spouse/partner suggested that it would be useful to have a private room or space for contacting home. This lack of privacy may impact how open families are able and willing to be when communicating.

***“There’s no privacy if he wants to speak to me about certain things say. His favourite one is often just the senior rates dining room.”  
(Partner 17, Surface fleet)***

***“But I personally think because the Wi-Fi is only in the mess, it’s more of a personal thing. If they’re sat in a mess full of how many people and people can just walk in and out, if you’re on a video call to your family... it’s not a personal thing. You know there’s too many people there.” (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)***

## Cost

The cost associated with communication was a challenging experience for some, but not all, serving families. Compared with traditional communication methods, the cost of using a personal phone presented a financial challenge for a small number of families. No cost-related challenges were discussed in association with sending letters, parcels and blueys, likely due to the provision of free and subsidised postage via British Forces Posted Overseas (BFPO) postal service and the Enduring Families Free Mail Service (EFFMS).

***“That is quite an expense, that was quite an expensive way to call, which is why we tended to limit it to just ten minutes because you know a pound per minute, it was actually quite an expensive... it was like getting the old BT phone... phone cards and you know extortionate rates per minute. It was actually cheaper to... to use your own data and things. So that isn’t good value for money, and I can imagine if you’re struggling financially, that that side of communicating could be quite tricky.” (Partner 19, Surface Fleet)***

SM/IBC also presented cost-related challenges for a subsection of the families interviewed. Spouses/partners commented on the significant cost of buying data or paying for Wi-Fi, for example in hotels and when a ship is docked in port, with some comments suggesting that due to this cost communication was limited to when free Wi-Fi could be accessed.

***“But... from here on in, it’s probably going to be a lot quieter when he’s docked because it’s so expensive to use his mobile phone outside of the EU. So, it’s going to be when he can connect to a Wi-Fi somewhere or... via internet will be cheaper than calling home or me calling him.” (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)***

***“You’re going to be paying whatever the rates are for the country you’re in. So, I think a lot of people will wait until they’re in like a Wi-Fi... like a café or something to use.” (Partner 7, Surface Fleet).***

## News

Children and young people’s news consumption of both traditional and social media and internet-based news sources varied, with some children and young people expressing an interest in the news and others having no engagement. Some families actively avoided the news, as they felt that engaging with the news may prompt anxiety.

***“They didn’t see it because they don’t really watch the news ... But I had explained and... you know simple terms what had happened and that everyone was fine, and I hadn’t spoken to him, but I’d heard from him that everyone was ok...” (Partner 11, Surface Fleet)***

***“They probably know more about the Royal Navy than me and my husband because they’re both a little bit geeky! And they both have Instagram, and they follow the Royal Navy on Instagram so they know way more than us than we do! Obviously, that is... there’s a lot of PRS around that so it tends to be more positive things than anything negative.” (Partner 19, Surface Fleet)***

Regardless of children and young people’s personal news consumption, it is important to acknowledge that they do not exist in isolation, with spouses/partners sharing experiences where their children have been exposed to news by their friends. Because of this and the potential for children and young people to be exposed to news online and on social media whilst at school, many parents felt it was helpful to be proactive in addressing news coverage that may be upsetting.

***“I think they’re old enough, the fact is that a lot of their friends’ parents had seen it on TV, so they would have told their children ... and you know we got messages from all... loads of people that we hadn’t heard from for a long time asking if everything was ok. So yeah, I felt I had to tell the children.”  
(Partner 11, Surface Fleet)***

***“My youngest is too young anyway, but my eldest panicked and I was thinking oh no... because I know he gets the news updates on his phone. Only saving grace is his phones a bit broken at the moment! So, I rang him and I said, ‘oh have you seen any news updates?’ He said, ‘oh no, news updates have stopped coming through on my phone now’. And I said, ‘that’s ok.’ ‘Why?’ So, I just explained to him you know what had happened ... he was like ‘oh ok so long as he’s alright’ and that’s that. But it did make me think how am I going to stop them you know from now on in having those... and seeing things”. (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)***

Exposure to negative news stories prompted feelings of anxiety in some children, young people and adults. However, there was no indication that SM/IBC exacerbated this in comparison to traditional news sources.

***“And that really... that really, really upset her and it had a real detrimental effect on her. But now she understands a bit more.” (Partner 12, Surface Fleet)***

***“The children did [worry] when they were little because they just didn’t understand and obviously, they would see lots on the news and you know they would say ‘Oh is Daddy out there?’ ‘That’s where Daddy is’. So... it was a lot harder, a lot harder for them than it was for me.” (Partner 18, Medical Services)***

## Choosing to share difficult news

Remote communication during separation meant that families had to choose what they wished to share with their serving family member. There was an indication that some young people kept information from their serving parent. Young people spoke about being aware of how busy their serving parents were whilst on deployment and that they may be stressed and tired. They said it would depend on the situation but would sometimes hide information so as not to add to their serving parent’s stress levels.

***“Say an argument had happened or something, and then you don’t really want to be piling onto the stress of him too much, but then sometimes you’ll just talk about it because it comes up in a conversation. And it really does depend on how we can normally see how he’s doing.” (Young person 20, Male, Aged 15)***

***“Sometimes I would 100% like leave it, say I had maybe like an argument with like my mum or something, I wouldn’t tell my dad that or like if there was something that happened at school, I wouldn’t say that to him at the time.” (Young person 12, Female, Aged 15)***

This choice of what is appropriate to share with the Serving person was also present in conversations with partners. Where this topic was discussed, seven partners commented that they tend to share challenges or negative experiences that arise during deployment with their partner, four partners described choosing not to share or filtering this experience and three commented on how their choice to share was situation-dependant.

Those who chose to share negative experiences as a matter of course highlighted the positives of this.

***“Oh, I always talk my challenges to [Serving partner] because I need to vent. And I think if I didn’t actually have [Serving partner] to talk to, I’d go crazy!” (Partner 6, Surface Fleet)***

***“I wouldn’t like it if someone hid... like kept it from me. So that’s my mindset, I would... if I want to know, you want to know” (Partner 7, Surface Fleet)***

One partner gave an example of how sharing a challenging situation at home allowed the Serving parent to parent from afar and help alleviate the child’s concerns.

***“I said the last week where she’s been doing little like kind of days where they trial the new classroom, the new teachers, she’s getting a bit anxious about it. So, no matter how many times I have talked to her about it, it wasn’t helping, she was having nightmares. It was like a... she was going through a little bit of a worry. I then decided to tell [Serving partner] about it and him talking to her just changed it, it was a game changer.” (Partner 7, Surface Fleet)***

Partners who chose not to share negative experiences or decided case-by-case discussed their concerns about the impact that sharing these experiences might have on their serving parent.

***“Definitely waited until it’s resolved, yeah. Because I can’t imagine anything worse than being out there and feeling... and men feel helpless anyway don’t they half the time?” (Partner 16, Fleet Air Arm)***

***“I don’t need him to worry about what’s going on at home, he’s got enough to worry about...” (Partner 20, Fleet Air Arm)***

## Summary of findings

- Many of the challenges associated with traditional communication methods are still experienced when utilising SM/IBC during separation, for example navigating time differences and family routines, communication blackouts, and the additional costs associated with regular communication
- However, SM/IBC presents several unique practical challenges for communication, and can exacerbate those associated with communication in general for families:
  - Variable and unstable Wi-Fi and internet connectivity on deployment was raised by many younger people and spouses/partners, meaning families were often unable to capitalise on the benefits of SM/IBC. This was exacerbated by competition for access to Wi-Fi on ship for Naval personnel. Young people were very understanding of the limitations that their serving parent experienced in communicating with them
  - Access to SM/IBC appeared to be impacted by the role and rank of Naval personnel. Submariners had the least access to SM/IBC due to the nature of their deployments, and it was highlighted that Naval personnel of higher rank would sometimes have access to personal phones and computers
  - Young people and spouses/partners highlighted the poor and unreliable access to Wi-Fi their serving family member would have access to on ship-based deployments compared to land-based deployments
- These practical issues had an emotional impact on young people and spouses/partners:
  - Unreliable connections, being cut off during conversations, missing calls, communication blackouts and a lack of contact from their serving parent, had the potential to cause concern, anxiety and upset for young people
  - Young people and spouses/partners reported significant worry about the reasons behind a lack of contact with their serving parent (i.e., parental safety)
  - Access to immediate forms of contact provided by SM/IBC also had the effect of raising expectations of contact, which were not always met due to practical barriers
- Young people and spouses/partners also reported the difficulties in determining whether to share day-to-day stresses with their serving family member. Indeed, young people reported worrying about causing their serving parent more stress by sharing their day-to-day stresses.

## Findings section 4: Comparing the perspectives of Naval spouses/partner and their children

There were 11 cases in which we spoke to both the Naval spouse/partner and their child(ren). This enabled us to carry out a comparative analysis of the key issues raised from each perspective. We did so by comparing our thematic analysis for each pair individually and identifying areas in which perspectives diverged. The rest of this section will outline the overarching themes from this analysis.

There was general agreement between the non-serving parent and their children on the difficulties associated with internet connection, time differences and fitting communication around family routines. Additionally, there was agreement that the emergence of SM/IBC technologies, particularly video calls, was beneficial in facilitating communication. It was also evident that spouses/partners were able to give much more detail regarding how they communicated with their serving partner and the issues associated with this, in comparison to their children. This is likely due to the difficulties associated with virtual data collection with children, which is discussed further in the [Limitations section of this report](#).

However, there were two areas in which diverging opinions were found across multiple pairs of parents and children: satisfaction with communication and masking difficult feelings. These are outlined in more detail with quotes below.

### Satisfaction with communication

The first area of diverging perspectives was focused on satisfaction with the method and frequency of communication with the serving family member. In these instances, the non-serving parents referenced feeling 'lucky' or content with the access they had to current methods and frequency of communication, a narrative that was common amongst spouses/partners in general.

***"We're really lucky because of the rank that [serving partner] is, he has his own email account which he can access regularly when he's away. So, we've always been quite lucky that you can send an email and you get a response quite quickly" (Partner 12, Surface Fleet)***

However, the children of these spouses reported either feeling that the method of communication used was limited, having limited expectations of communication and/or desiring more or different methods of communication with their serving parent.

***"But when Dad deploys he turns his phone off completely until he gets to port. So, it's only email with him... Sometimes I don't expect him to like contact us. Because I know they are very busy all the time". (Young person 5,***

*Female, Aged 17).*

***"When my Dad was home we would always play like this football game on like my PlayStation together... [when Dad is on deployment] the connection isn't good enough." (Young person 6, Male, Aged 12)***

### Masking difficult feelings

Both spouses/partners and their children discussed masking their concern for their serving family member from other family members and holding back on sharing negative news and emotions with their serving family members. There were instances in which spouses/partners were unaware of their child's concern or worry for their serving parent or felt that they were dealing with it well. One example of this was associated with the child getting older, however, the child still indicated concern for their serving parent:

***"Now the children are older they kind of understand that sometimes in a deployment things change... They're old enough to understand that there might be a negative change, but I don't think they worry too much about that." (Partner 19, Fleet Air Arm)***

***"Mainly like I don't know where he is and don't know what's happened if ... or if something has gone wrong." (Young person 17, Male, Aged 16)***

There were also instances in which the spouse/partner felt that children were unaware they were trying to shield their children from negative news, but the child indicated they were aware of this.

***"it's not something either of them have ever vocalised to me though if I'm honest. They've never went 'I'm really worried about Dad getting hurt' or something like that" (Partner 16, Fleet Air Arm)***

***"It's hard to know what your kid is going to think about ... what's going on because you can be like 'oh you know it's all fine and stuff', because you're kind of trying to hide what's going on. But then you get stuff like in the news and the misinformation at school, that kind of like can add to that, and you can't tell your kids necessarily." (Young person 22, Female, Aged 20)***



## Summary of section

- Our comparative analysis of parent and child responses suggests broad agreement of the benefits of SM/IBC in facilitating communication with their serving family member, and how practical issues such as internet connection and time differences can impact of communication
- However, there appears to be a disconnect in satisfaction with how they communicate with their serving family member and how often this is possible
- In addition, it was evident that some partners/spouses were unaware of their child's concern or worry for their parent, with some children reporting that they tried to mask these feelings from their parents

## Findings section 5: What changes could be made to help Naval families maintain the parent-child virtual relationship during separation?

When asked if there were any changes or improvements that could be made to support virtual relationship during separation, children, young people, and partners had many suggestions of potential improvements, which had implications for schools, the MOD, and military charities in the UK. Whilst children and young people did provide suggestions (i.e., desire for a network or community of Naval children and young people), it must be noted that the majority of suggestions were made by partners or drawn from their insights.

## Creating a community

Several of the children we spoke to highlighted that being a military child was quite isolating, even in a school that is considered to have a 'high' number of military families. Children reported that one school would put on special 'mindfulness' sessions only for military children, which although they appreciated, "being called out of lesson over the tannoys saying can so-and-so... this person, this person and this person all come down to this room... can be a bit awkward" (Young person 20, Male, Aged 15). Which also added to the children feeling even more 'singled out'. Instead, children suggested that they would like to have a community or network of children who have a serving parent that extends beyond the school gates.

***"I feel like they could put in place kind of like not necessarily clubs, but like sports activities or like days where it's like if your parents away you can like come and join in with this at like this park or something" (Young person 12, Female, Aged 15).***

The children stressed that their schools do try and do similar activities within their school, but it is not well communicated. There was an appetite for a larger community or network, with fun activity days for Naval children to come together not just from within their school. It was also suggested that an 'online forum' for Naval children to communicate and build a community would be helpful, similar to the online forum that indicated their parents have.

***"I don't know like if different bases could set up like a... you know like you have a... online forums nowadays where kids can... like parents can like allow them to you know talk on there, maybe meet some kids in the same area to be able to communicate" (Young person 22, Female, Aged 20).***

Across the focus groups with children there was a strong need for 'belonging' and talking to other children who understand what it is like to have a parent who is serving.

## Better Wi-Fi

Better Wi-Fi connection was a common improvement mentioned by both children and spouses/partners, particularly for those deployed on ship. However, partners also expressed an appreciation that this may not be achievable for those who are ship-based.

***"The Wi-Fi could be a bit better, but then Wi-Fi in the middle of the ocean! [LAUGH]" (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)***

***"I would say just them having better Wi-Fi on ship!" (Partner 6, Surface Fleet)***

***"Obviously better Wi-Fi on the ships would be ideal" (Young person 10, Female, Aged 21)***

***"And there's some places where I understand that you can't have Wi-Fi. But it would be nice just to have it on at certain times to get a message or something" (Young person 4, Male, Aged 15)***

Additionally, several partners also expressed gratitude for the access they had currently, despite challenges, experiences or desires for improvements.

***"I was surprised they could even get Wi-Fi in the middle of the ocean"***



***anyway. So! [LAUGH] I think I should be appreciative of the fact that you know somehow Wi-Fi is still available in the middle of the ocean whereas I can't even get phone signal in my house!" (Partner 6, Surface Fleet)***

## Video communication

Several partners referred to the need for improving access to video-based communication methods for Serving persons whilst deployed. Suggestions focused on the need to facilitate either sending pre-recorded videos, or more reliable methods of video calling:

***"To have some sort of like video voicemail system where either we could send a video to him or he could send a video to us, which again is sort of a very rapid form of communication, but it's not reliant on both of us being there at the right time. That would be ideal for the younger children because it then means that again we could watch it back several times, we could just watch it at the time when they're in a right frame of mind." (Partner 2, Fleet Air Arm)***

***"Maybe even having the option of video calling not on their phones because the phones don't seem to hold up the Wi-Fi. Maybe if there was like a computer that they had access to with a camera where they could. Like I don't know how that would work because there'd be a camera on them then and the security. But you know if there was a laptop or a computer that could be used for everyone really. Just to do a video call home." (Partner 3, Surface Fleet)***

Furthermore, in line with previous comments on the lack of privacy for Serving personnel using SM/IBC, one partner recommending a dedicated private communication space to facilitate video communication on ship.

## Changes to Resources

Many suggestions centred around partners' desires for more or improved deployment information and resources. Partners spoke of the challenges of becoming acquainted with the military lifestyle in terms of understanding where to seek support and resources if needed, as well as figuring out how to best navigate periods of separation, with one parent commenting on how this may be of additional value to dispersed families.

***"I've sort of found a lot of this out myself, but it's taken years to understand the system, and I don't know that there's a... ideal way to do it, but certainly for the military to be much more forthcoming and proactive with oh this is where you need to go. I do find it quite confusing that there are so many different organisations which is great!" (Partner 2, Fleet Air Arm)***

They expressed desires for specific resources for managing virtual family relationships, as well as more general resources that focus on deployment and explaining some of the potential challenges, for example how return dates may change.

***"Probably a bit of information on that really, a heads-up like dates will change when they go, when they come back." (Partner 16, Fleet Air Arm)***

Several spouses/partners commented on the need for resources to be tailored to different age groups, and a desire for more resources for older children.

***"And again every age group, you'll have different strategies and different ideas [for managing a virtual relationship]. So, I would love it if there was a sort of go-to place where they would just say ok you could do this, this, this, this. I think it would be brilliant." (Partner 2, Fleet Air Arm)***

***"But what would be really helpful in kind of deployment packs and things is a... some things for teenagers and I'm not talking about your twelve, thirteen year old, I'm talking about your fourteen to eighteen year old who are really going through the emotions, understanding... no, they listen to the news, in RE [Religious education] they will listen to... you know they're taught about some of the conflicts that are going on in the world, and in history." (Partner 5, Surface Fleet)***

Additionally, partners suggested resources for Serving personnel that highlight what families might be experiencing during periods of separation:

***"I think it's more about teaching the people on board the impact it will have on the person back home. So, I think all forms of communication are there, I think it's that person having an understanding of what it's like to be on the other end of waiting for that phone call." (Partner 7, Surface Fleet)***

Finally, one partner suggested the need for more education around online security and what can be shared back home, in line with operational security.

**“So, I do think there is some training that needs to be put out here because even I see people, I know that put dates online and you’re like you can’t put that online and... so... there’s learning... every... we’re always learning, isn’t it?” (Partner 7, Surface Fleet)**

This aligns with comments from other spouses/partners that evidenced a potential misunderstanding of what can and cannot be posted and the negative impact that this can have on security, pushing back return dates and lowering morale.

**“Some people can forget the sort of etiquette of what to and what not to post. It could be dates or it could be conditions or incidents and often... if somebody put something up it can incite trouble because then if nobody has heard about it, they say oh my God what’s happened? And that brings a whole can of worms or equally it can just be that... let’s be honest there’s always three sides to every story, this side, that side and the truth.” (Partner 17, Surface Fleet)**

Some parents highlighted the importance of schools having an understanding of the difficulties children may experience communicating with their Serving parent and recommended that schools receive deployment resources outlining general and communication-related challenges that military children may face.

**“I mean even like sending an information pack to the schools of the children that have got the military connection, because I know on some of the groups and like Reading Force I know asks what school he’s at and stuff. But then you know it’s nice if they were sent an information pack about what’s happening in regards... not what’s happening in deployment, but you know what he might be going through in his head. And to support and kind of like educate the teachers because if they’ve never come across it, it’s difficult for them to be compassionate with him and... you know if he’s having a particularly bad day or... you know they’re like why is he acting up? And kind of you know it might be that he’s not... he’s missed a phone call with him and stuff.” (Partner 8, Surface Fleet)**

**“I think for me, it’s very important that schools understand the situations that Service children are in communication-wise.” (Partner 18, Medical Services)**

Whilst not specifically related to communication, spouses/partners commented on the merit of having a centralised and visible online location that collated the available resources, support, discounts and offer for military families.

**“But I think there’s a bit of confusion about where they all sit and if there’s one central place that you can look at to be able to get all the information”. (Partner 4, Surface Fleet)**

## Financial support for the cost of SM/IBC

As previously noted, cost can be a challenge for some, though not all, Naval families. Some partners commented that assistance with the costs relating to SM/IBC communication would be useful for some families during deployment, or for those that lived overseas.

**“I think that’s a downfall in my eyes with the Navy, like they’re not provided with internet access. You know they have to pay for it which again is something... you know another expense for them. I know obviously they get paid out there, but I think having like an allowance for internet would kind of... it makes them a bit more relaxed; they forget that they’re away from home, they’re away from comforts and stuff. So, like sometimes he’s messaged and said, ‘oh I’ve run out of internet, we’ll have to chat another night’. And it’s like... you know it’s a shame that they don’t get it provided” (Partner 8, Surface Fleet)**

**“And for instance, in [Overseas Location] mobile coverage is very, very dear per month, like you know it was like £100 we were paying a month there compared to the £30 a month here for your broadband and telly. We didn’t have like minutes included when you brought... brought data which was really, really dear and I don’t remember any sort of recompense for having to have those additional costs”. (Partner 17, Surface Fleet)**

One partner suggested that the allocated free satellite phone minutes her partner received could be swapped for mobile data instead.

***“That’s something that can’t really be altered. But I would say where the welfare fund or however it’s done, they’re given free Paradigm minutes, I would rather utilise some of that fund towards giving like a data allowance especially for ships like... like John’s that’s based out there three years between [Location] and [Location].” (Partner 17, Surface Fleet)***

The issue of access to personal devices due to cost did not arise in our sample. However, this is not surprising given the virtual data collection undertaken and constitutes a limitation of this research. However, one partner commented on this in relation to other families who may be in need, which suggests a potential lack of awareness of current avenues of support with the cost of essential technology.

***“I don’t think so. I mean you know if we hadn’t had like our phones and laptops, you know it might be nice if like something like that was provided families that don’t have that facility, you know not saying myself because you know I’ve got my phone in my hand! But you know some families might not have that and not be able to have that connection.” (Partner 8, Surface Fleet)***

## Newsletter

Another common suggestion was that MOD consider increasing the usage of newsletters during deployments, ensuring that this provision covered all families, for example those who deploy singularly. Several partners highlighted how they enjoyed reading the newsletters and finding out what their serving partner was doing on deployment.

***“Sometimes they would post stuff or send a newsletter out about the ship. So, you could see what they were up to and it was really nice to see. I remember this had a picture once and it was my husband playing rugby and it was lovely you know to see a picture of him like that. So, I think keeping you in the loop of the ship’s activity whether that’s a newsletter or an email. That’s really helpful. And like I said having a contact list if you say you needed to get in touch.” (Partner 16, Fleet Air Arm)***

***“I don’t know what... it may be just a sort of newsletter, a monthly newsletter, you know because once the ships been there, it’s not secret anymore. So arguably it’s not sensitive, so arguably a little you know everyone knows that she’s on the carrier. So maybe a newsletter from the [ship] to MOD, they***

***sanitise it and then send it to various email addresses. I’m sure it used to happen in my days, but I’ve had nothing.” (Partner 21, Surface Fleet)***

This echoed with comments from other spouses/partners about the benefits of newsletters. For example, one newsletter deployed a character that was pitched to amuse both adults and children and gave a flavour of what the serving person was up to, albeit rose-tinted.

***“Oh, the bear would be in the captain’s seat for example and there would be a photograph and it would be ‘Oh you know... he’s in the captain’s seat, but we mustn’t tell the captain!’ You know it was written in a really nice way for children. And my kids loved that. They thought that was brilliant. And I know from talking to my husband, I don’t know if that was an official communication, but it was just like someone on-board had decided to take that on. But it was brilliant. There was a lot of you know tongue-in-cheek things that have been said... you know he went out... like the Bear might have gone out for a run ashore the night before and he was... had a bit of a headache now! [LAUGH] Of course you know parents could read into that and that the children were like ‘Oh, no, poor bear’ you know.” (Partner 18, Medical Services)***

## Better communication during blackouts

Discussions revealed the emotional impact that communication blackouts can have. Partners shared their wishes for more direct and timely communication from the MOD to contextualise the blackout, expressing an understanding that sometimes operational needs will take priority in the short term. There was some suggestion that this could help combat any sensationalism or misinformation that made it into the news or online.

***“At that point you kind of think well they just need to send out a message to families to say communication is down, will contact you within a week and if there’s a problem then we’ll... you know you’ll know before anyone else sort of thing.”***

***“But equally people at home need to understand that sometimes things***

***happen that are fast moving, and you can't always send that information. I think it's got to go both ways; you have to understand that that is part of their job and if there is a... if there's something happening that's really important, you know the Russians are coming to get you or whatever, the first thought isn't oh I need to email everybody and let them know that the Russians are coming! (Partner 19, Surface Fleet)***

## Accessibility of Blueys

Some partners spoke about improvements that could be made to blueys. Whilst not SM/IBC-related, considering findings that some families struggled to access blueys and/or experienced delays, these recommendations have been included to support improvements to communication more broadly. Partners commented on their desire for increased delivery speed to avoid significant delays, and a system for ordering blueys on demand.

***“Obviously, I don't mind covering the postage to get them [blueys] to me, a couple of quid postage obviously they're free every other way. But if it meant I got a stack of thirty or you know a bundle of ten for a pound or something to cover the postage. Then you know that's still quite doable.”***

***“Just get the Blueys to them because you know they like to receive something, they must be bored, they're not getting anything from home. He has had a parcel that we sent, so parcels are getting to them, I think. They're probably about five weeks behind on the parcels, but for some reason it's just the... the Blueys which you would think would be more regular than the parcels and easier to transport.” (Partner 20, Fleet Air Arm)***

## Summary of findings

- Young people and spouses/partners made several suggestions of how to better support virtual family relationships during separation
- Some of these suggestions related to improved facilities for SM/IBC to be provided by the Navy, for example improving the Wi-Fi on deployments, and providing Naval personnel with access to video-based communication technologies on ship
- In addition, it was felt that the Navy could provide better communication and updates to families (i.e., newsletter updates on deployments). Providing families with better information about security blackouts could reduce concern and worry
- Better support and resources for young people and families were also suggested in several areas:
  - Centralised and highly visible information and resources regarding deployment in general and how best to manage family communication, tailored for different age groups and family members
  - Development of a network of Naval children and young people
  - Financial support for families struggling with the costs of SM/IBC (i.e., prepaid mobile data)



## Discussion of findings

This project represents the first in-depth qualitative study in the UK investigating how military families use SM/IBC during separation, and the impact of this on managing parent-child relationships.

In this report we have reviewed the international literature focused on how both civilian and military families use social media for communication when separated. We have then outlined the findings of interviews and focus groups with 25 Naval children and young people, and 21 Naval partners and spouses in the UK, focused on this issue.

It was evident from the literature reviewed, and indeed the majority of international literature focused on the experiences of military children, that including children and young people themselves in research about them is the exception rather than the rule. Most research of this nature uses parental or other adult perspectives as a proxy for children's experiences, often due to the complexities of including under-18s in research. Indeed, several recent UK reports have highlighted the lack of military children's voices in research, and the tendency to focus on psychological and educational outcomes, rather than lived experience<sup>137 138</sup>. Furthermore, research highlights the tendency for parent and child perspectives to diverge on similar experiences and events, thus further emphasising the importance of including both. As such, including both Naval children and young people's perspectives alongside their non-serving parent was integral to this project and represents a significant strength of the evidence provided.

As discussed in the Introduction to this report, Naval families in the UK experience the most separation from their serving family member in comparison to the other Service branches. As such, the rise of newer instant forms of social media and internet-based technologies (i.e., instant messaging and video calls) provides the opportunity for more regular contact between Naval family members. Indeed, international research in civilian families suggests that this type of communication is particularly beneficial where families have limited opportunities for face-to-face communication<sup>139</sup>, and is shown both to support wellbeing when family members are away from home<sup>140</sup> and to have a positive impact on feelings of closeness between family members<sup>141</sup>.

137 Lee, C. Not "just another school day". *An arts-based dialogic inquiry into the learning lives of children in armed forces families in a UK primary school*. 2020.

138 Godier-McBard L, Wood A & Fossey M. *The Impact of Service Life on the Military Child: The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict – Update and Review Report*. 2021.

139 Abel S, Machin T, Brownlow C. *Social media, rituals, and long-distance family relationship maintenance: A mixed-methods systematic review*. *New Media & Society*. 2021;23(3):632-54.

140 Bacigalupe G, Bräuninger I. *Emerging technologies and family communication: The case of international students*. *Contemporary Family Therapy*. 2017;39(4):289-300.

141 Williams AL, Merten MJ. *iFamily: Internet and social media technology in the family context*. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*. 2011;40(2):150-70.

## How do UK Naval families use social media and internet-based technology to communicate during separation?

Our findings suggest that Naval families use a wide variety of SM/IBC technologies to communicate with their serving family member during separation, with a preference for instant messaging and video calls. Both children/young people and their at-home parent commented on the ease with which these newer technologies could facilitate regular communication compared to more traditional methods of communication (i.e., letters and phone calls). Furthermore, partners/spouses discussed the creative ways in which children used social media to connect with their serving parent; for example, using emojis and animations through instant messaging and sharing video content via platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

Children and young people were acutely aware that they were missing out on the parent-child relationship that many of their non-military peers had, and the importance of maintaining their relationship with their serving parent whilst they were separated. As such, they felt that SM/IBC enabled them to involve their serving parent in their everyday life, discussing how they would send them pictures of what they had been doing and ask them for virtual support with homework. Indeed, international research also refers to the creative use of technology in supporting 'parenting at a distance', enabling military partners/spouses to keep their serving partner updated and involved in their child(ren)'s lives<sup>142 143</sup>. However, this report extends these findings to the parent-child relationship directly and to UK military families for the first time.

We also found that the ability to use SM/IBC for families appeared to be related on Service personnel rank and role. There was some indication that those of higher rank had better access to communication infrastructure in general, which is supported by the international research reviewed for this report<sup>144</sup>. Submariner families are severely restricted in their ability to utilise SM/IBC due to the nature of their deployment, and miss out on the opportunity for more regular contact. Indeed, Submariner families described how communication could often be limited to family grams, which enable families to send 120 words a week to their serving family member whilst on Submarines<sup>145</sup>. When these families were able to communicate using video calls, one partner described how this was experienced as being upsetting and disruptive to children rather than being positive, as the family had settled into being unable to communicate with their serving member. Whilst this is the first UK report to look at the experience of Submariner families specifically, we were only able to interview two spouses/partners and two young people from Submariner families. However, other Naval children and young people expressed sympathy for those who have a parent in the Submarine fleet, due to the lack of communication. As such, further research is required to investigate the

142 Louie, AD, Cromer, LD. *Parent-child attachment during the deployment cycle: Impact on reintegration parenting stress*. *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice*. 2014; 45(6):496-503.

143 Schachman, KA. *Online Fathering: The Experience of First-Time Fatherhood in Combat-Deployed Troops*. 2010; 59(1): 11-17.

144 Atwood, K. *Maintaining "the Family" during deployment: Presence work by Military Families*. 2014.

145 Ministry of Defence. *Familygrams advice to nominees*. 2021.



lived experience of Submariner families and how best to support them to maintain their family relationships during separation.

In addition to some groups lacking the ability to SM/IBC, Naval children/young people and spouses/partners reported several common practical difficulties, the most prominent being intermittent and/or unstable internet connections on deployment. This was a particular problem on ship-based deployments, in which Wi-Fi was often variable, and was exacerbated by competition for internet access. This is supported by research in the UK and US, in which several studies describe variable communication infrastructure and internet connection depending on deployment location<sup>146 147 148</sup>. Whilst this issue is not simple to resolve, both children/young people and spouses/partners felt that this was something that should be reviewed or monitored by the Royal Navy.

Young people were very understanding and accepting of the limitations of their parent's communication whilst on deployment. However, it was clear that this had an emotional impact on them. Some young people spoke of concern, anxiety and worry for their serving parent when they lost contact (i.e., due to unstable connections or communication blackouts). In addition, the immediacy of SM/IBC meant that young people's expectation of prompt responses to contact were not always met by their serving parent. Indeed, previous research with UK Service children has highlighted the frustration that children can feel when trying to contact their serving parent using unreliable internet-based technologies with limited connectivity<sup>149</sup>. Spouses/partners agreed that varied access and availability of SM/IBC can have an impact on their children's wellbeing, and some also commented on the frustration of the serving parent when unable to connect.

Interestingly, when comparing the perspectives of young people and their at-home parent (i.e., in the 11 instances in which both parties were interviewed) we found divergence in responses concerning whether and how they communicated their concern for their serving family member. Our findings suggest that some young people intentionally masked their concern from their at-home parent, who was not always aware of the extent of the emotional impact on their child. This finding supports previous research with UK Service children, which found that children may hide their anxiety from their parents in order not to burden them. This previous research further discusses these findings in the context of the 'stiff upper-lip, little trooper discourses' that can be seen in literature, placing military children as resilient and stoic<sup>150</sup>. Together these findings highlight the importance of supporting Service children and young people during loss of contact with their serving parent, and ensuring they are reassured of their safety, even when they appear unaffected.

146 Atwood, K. *Maintaining "the Family" during deployment: Presence work by Military Families*. 2014.

147 Children's Commissioner. *Kin and Country: Growing Up as an Armed Forces Child*. 2018.

148 Durham, S. *Service Members' Experiences of Staying Connected With Family While Deployed*. *Advances in Nursing Science*. 2015; 38(4), 279-297.

149 Lee, C. Not "just another school day". *An arts-based dialogic inquiry into the learning lives of children in armed forces families in a UK primary school*. 2020.

150 Lee, C. 2020. See above.

## How can we better support Naval families to manage virtual relationships?

Our findings highlight several ways in which SM/IBC can facilitate communication for Naval families, and participants also provided insight into how they felt they could be better supported.

Video-based synchronous communication (i.e., communication in real time) was reported as the preferred method for maintaining communication with the serving family member in this report and in the international literature related to both civilian and military family communication during separation<sup>151 152 153</sup>. This type of communication is found to foster closeness and connectedness amongst separated families and allow them to see that their loved one is safe<sup>154</sup>. Furthermore, our findings and previous research support the use of video calls to better engage with younger children<sup>155</sup>. Young people in this study also felt that communicating via a video application made it easier to have difficult conversations and to share their feelings with their serving partner. These findings highlight the importance of supporting Naval families to use video-based technology to maintain their family relationships. Indeed, spouses/partners suggested that improving or providing access to video-based technologies on deployment would significantly enhance Naval personnel's ability to regularly communicate with their children.

Whilst not an issue for all families that we spoke to, the cost of buying mobile data to maintain SM/IBC was raised as an issue for some. This is again in line with international research with military families<sup>156 157</sup>, particularly for those who have no formal access to communication infrastructure on deployment. Partners/spouses in our study highlighted the potential for this to limit family communication for some Naval Personnel, and suggestions were made regarding providing financial support to these individuals.

Families in our study also felt that they could be provided with improved information and updates from the Royal Navy regarding current deployments. This was both in terms of broader information about managing separation and communication, providing updates on the specific ship crew or deployment (i.e., in keeping with what is required by security), and keeping families informed on communication blackouts. Indeed, communication blackouts were highlighted by both young people and spouses/partners in our study as significant sources of anxiety and concern, supported by the

151 Nedelcu M, Wyss M. *Doing family through ICT-mediated ordinary co-presence: transnational communication practices of Romanian migrants in Switzerland*. *Global Networks*. 2016;16(2):202-18.

152 Cabalquinto EC. *Home on the move: negotiating differential domesticity in family life at a distance*. *Media, culture & society*. 2018;40(6):795-816.

153 Durham, S. *Service Members' Experiences of Staying Connected With Family While Deployed*. *Advances in Nursing Science*. 2015; 38(4), 279-297.

154 Goodney, R. *A Mixed Methods Study of Technological Influences on Communication and Media Exposure in Military Children Experiencing Parental Deployment*. 2014.

155 Share M, Williams C, Kerrins L. *Displaying and performing: Polish transnational families in Ireland Skyping grandparents in Poland*. *New Media & Society*. 2018;20(8):3011-28.

156 Durham, S. 2015. See above.

157 Atwood, K. *Maintaining "the Family" during deployment: Presence work by Military Families*. 2014.



international literature<sup>158 159</sup>, which could be ameliorated with better centralised updates to families.

Whilst we are aware that several organisations already provide resources to support children during separation from their serving parent, it was evident from our findings that there is a need for resources that are tailored for different age groups. In particular, spouses/partners highlighted a lack of resources for older children and young people, who are perhaps assumed to have a better understanding of deployment and military life. Furthermore, it was clear from speaking to Naval children and young people that being a military child could be isolating, even in areas or schools with a high military presence. There was a desire to facilitate a feeling of 'belonging' by creating a network or community of Naval children, particularly for older children, to share experiences and create connections. This suggestion is in line with the recently launched 'UK Armed Forces Families Strategy: 2022-2032'<sup>160</sup>, which highlights the need for policymakers to take advantage of the opportunities that advancements in technology and social media can offer by developing virtual communities and support networks for families. Additionally, spouses/partners felt that better awareness and resources were needed within schools of how best to support Naval children during separation, with inconsistency noted across different schools in the same area.

## Limitations of this research

It is important to note some limitations of the qualitative interview and focus groups undertaken for this research. Firstly, the nature of this research project (i.e., an in-depth exploration of broad themes and issues experienced, including a diverse group of Naval families) means we were unable to provide an in-depth analysis of the experiences of families from different Naval Arms and roles. However, some groups were underrepresented in our sample and their unique experiences warrant further investigation:

1. **Submariners:** *Despite rigorous recruitment efforts, we had a limited number of Submariner families (2 partners, 2 children) in the sample, so our findings are limited in their generalisability*
2. **Royal Marines:** *No Royal Marine families participated, despite targeted recruitment efforts via Royal Marine organisations. Therefore, we are unable to comment on the experience of these families*
3. **Specific occupational roles:** *Whilst there was some suggestion that certain roles had unique experiences, for example those in the medical Services, our sample only included one family from this role*

158 Durham, S. 2015. See above.

159 Atwood, K. 2014. See above.

160 Ministry of Defence. *UK Armed Forces Families Strategy: 2022-2032*. 2022.

Secondly, due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, it was necessary to undertake our data collection remotely. Whilst the online format did not appear to hinder interview with Naval partners/spouses, the focus groups with children and young people proved more challenging. Vignettes were deployed to help children and young people feel able to share their experience and to facilitate discussion. However, some of the younger children in our sample struggled to participate beyond expressing broad agreement or disagreement with aspects of the vignettes or other children's contributions. As such, future research with younger children should look to employ face-to-face data collection and creative methods for enabling children to express their experiences.

Lastly, we were unable to speak to currently serving Naval personnel due to restrictions in accessing this population without MOD ethical approval. We were unable to obtain this approval within the timeline of the project, and as such, we are not able to include the perspectives of the serving parent within our findings. It will be important for future research to explore the experiences of Naval personnel in maintaining their family relationships virtually during separation, to enable targeted support and resources to be developed for this population, in addition to their at-home family members.

Limitations of the international literature identified in the scoping review are outlined in [Appendix 5](#).

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, we make the following recommendations for policy, practice, and research focused on Naval and military children and young people. These have been split into those directed towards the Royal Navy and/or Ministry of Defence, the military charity sector, and researchers in the field.

### Recommendations for the Royal Navy/Ministry of Defence

1. **Ongoing assessment of internet connectivity:** Findings from both the international literature and our interviews with Naval families highlight the inconsistent internet connectivity experienced by Naval Personnel, and the difficulties this can create in maintaining virtual family relationships. Inconsistent access was related to differences in communication infrastructure across deployment locations and appears to vary by rank and occupational role. The unreliability of SM/IBC experienced by families created anxiety and upset for both spouses/partners and their children, and several participants suggested that the Royal Navy should review or improve their Wi-Fi facilities for Naval Personnel.

**Considering these findings, we recommend that the Royal Navy monitor and audit their Wi-Fi facilities on Naval bases and ships, to ensure parity of access across Naval Arms, ranks and roles, as far as is feasible. We recognise that it is not always feasible to provide or enhance Wi-Fi in all deployment locations or across**



**all Naval Arms (e.g., for those in the Submarine Service), however, the Royal Navy should ensure that clear guidance is in place to manage the expectations of Naval personnel and families regarding the use of SM/IBC during separation. Whilst the findings of this research relate specifically to Naval families, we recommend that other Service branches also review and monitor their internet facilities for Service personnel and families on base and during deployment, to support them in maintaining virtual family relationships.**

- 2. Supporting video-based communication:** Both existing international research and the findings in this report support military families' preference for utilising video-based communication to maintain virtual relationships during separation. Furthermore, we found that this method of communication was suggested to better engage younger children in communication with their serving parent, to enable Naval personnel to remain involved in their child's day-to-day life, and to support the maintenance of the child-parent relationship. Indeed, some participants felt that it would be beneficial for the Royal Navy to provide fixed facilities on ship for enhanced video communication during deployment (i.e., computer stations with internet and camera facilities).

**Whilst we recognise that it may not be feasible to provide fixed facilities for Naval personnel to record videos or engage in video-based communication on ship, we recommend that the Royal Navy review how other Naval organisations (i.e., those across the 5 Eyes nations) support Naval personnel to use video-based communication and look to implement examples of best practice, including how use of this type of facility might be supervised. It is also recommended that clear guidance is provided to Naval personnel as to how they might engage with family members via video, during periods of inconsistent internet access (i.e., by pre-recording videos prior to deployment, or during times of connectivity), to maintain their relationships with their children during separation.**

- 3. Enhanced communication with families and managing expectations:** Many of the challenges for Naval families identified in this report and the existing literature relate to difficulties in balancing increased expectations for communication due to the rise on SM/IBC, with the realities of military life (i.e., time differences in deployment locations, communication restrictions, unpredictable working hours) and unreliable internet connectivity on deployment. Naval families expressed a desire for better communication from the Royal Navy regarding deployments in general, resources, communication methods (i.e., how to access blueys), and offers for families, and instances in which communication would not be possible (i.e., communication blackouts).

**We are aware that the Royal Navy has recently relaunched the Royal Navy Forum, which provides a hub of resources and information for Naval families in the UK. We recommend that the Royal Navy review and promote awareness of this Forum amongst families and ensure that information is kept comprehensive**

**and regularly updated. This should include guidance related to access to communication methods (e.g., including how to access blueys) and restrictions on what information can be shared to maintain operational security, in order to manage family's expectations of communication with their serving family member. We further recommend that the Royal Navy designate a moderator within this Forum to provide clear statements to families where possible, relating to communication blackouts and restrictions, with clear direction as to when this will be lifted, or when further updates will be provided. Additionally, we recommend that the Royal Navy review the consistency with which deployment newsletters are used across Naval Arms and deployments, to ensure parity of experience for families, as far as is feasible.**

**We suggest that charitable organisations, such as the Naval Children's Charity and the Naval Family Federations, should raise awareness and signpost to these resources. Consideration should also be given to the development of a resources site for professionals working with Naval children (across education, health and social care), to enhance awareness of their support needs and support services available, utilising the model provide by the Royal Navy Forum.**

## Recommendations for the military charity sector

- 4. Developing resources for military children:** As mentioned in Recommendation 3, many of the challenges experienced by Naval families in this research and the existing international literature, related to managing expectations of SM/IBC, within the constraints of military life and operational security. Furthermore, Naval spouses/partners in this research highlighted a paucity of guidance and resources for older children, to support them in maintaining their relationship with their serving parent during deployment.

**We are aware that there exist several resources to support military children during the deployment of a parent, including the 'Knit the family' resource provided by the Naval Children's Charity. We recommend that these resources are reviewed and amended to provide guidance specifically related to maintaining virtual relationships (i.e., including strategies for how best to utilise SM/IBC, such as pre-recorded videos, bedtime stories) and managing expectations for communication considering the challenges reported in this research (i.e., inconsistent internet connectivity, restraints on communication due to blackouts and operational security). We further recommend that separate resources are developed for older children and young people, to ensure that the guidance is targeted appropriately for developmental age. Furthermore, this is in line with Recommendation 21 of the 'Living in Our Shoes' report, which highlights the need for age-appropriate resources in this context.**



**5. Ensuring awareness and support in schools:** Naval families in this research highlighted the inconsistency across different schools in their awareness of the challenges faced by military children. This is a finding that is consistent with recent UK research focused on military families (i.e., the 'Impact of Service Life on the Military Child' and 'Living in Our Shoes' reports). However, this report highlights specifically the inconsistent support provided to children to facilitate maintenance of the parent-child relationship, considering difficulties in communication caused by time zone differences, family schedules, and inconsistent connectivity.

**We are aware that the Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP) have developed a resource to help schools support military children, the 'Thriving Lives Toolkit'. Whilst the toolkit does prompt practitioners to consider supporting virtual communication, we recommend that guidance within this Toolkit includes strategies and advice on how best to support children to maintain their virtual relationship with their parent during separation, with a particular focus on safely utilising SM/IBC. This should be co-produced with children and young people, to ensure it reflects their needs. We further recommend that the Naval Children's Charity and/or other military charities work with schools to disseminate this guidance and best practice for supporting military children. Additionally, in line with Recommendation 27 of the 'Living in Our Shoes' report, we suggest that the Department for Education (DfE) collect systematic information about how the Service Pupil Premium is being used to support Service children in schools during deployment and separation, and promote the sharing of best practice in this context.**

**6. Develop a community for Naval children and young people:** The Naval children and young people that we spoke to highlighted how isolating it can feel to be a military child, particularly in areas and schools with low numbers of military children. There was a clear desire to connect with other Naval children, to share experiences and develop networks of support, particularly for older children and adolescents. Additionally, children and young people discussed the innovative ways in which they would like to communicate with other children and their serving parents, for example, utilising multi-player online games and shared online spaces.

**We recommend that innovative ways of enabling Naval children to connect and network with other Naval children are developed, for example utilising apps and shared online spaces. This is in line with acknowledgement in the 'UK Armed Forces Families Strategy: 2022-2032'<sup>161</sup> of the need to utilise technological advancements, such as social media, to develop virtual communities and support for military families. We recognise the need to consider safeguarding in online spaces for children and recommend careful consideration of this during the development of online/social media-based solutions.**

**We are aware of existing Youth Forums in the military community, including the SCiP's Connected Forces Project<sup>162</sup>, open to Service children aged 16-19, and the Royal Navy Youth Forum, run by Royal Navy Family People Support. We recommend a review of awareness and reach of this and other youth forums, as the children and young people in our research did not appear to be engaged with these. We are also aware that the existing 'Kings Camps' for Naval children during school holidays<sup>163</sup> are being developed to include a specific event for older children. As such, we recommend that any app or online space provides signposting to this and other events that would enable Naval children to connect with each other face-to-face.**

**Additionally, we recommend that charitable organisations, such as the Naval Children's Charity and other military charities consider developing an 'Ambassador' scheme, where young people with lived experience of military separation can volunteer to provide peer support and signposting to other military children.**

**7. Financial support for Naval families:** It is evident from our research and the international literature, that some military families struggle to meet the costs of maintaining SM/IBC. This is most commonly due to the need for purchasing additional mobile data by Service personnel where Wi-Fi is unavailable or unreliable during deployment, to enable them to speak to their families. Whilst most families interviewed did not have this problem (likely related to the virtual nature of data collection in this study), they indicated that there were other families who did experience these difficulties.

**We are aware that several charities provide means-tested financial support to Naval families, including the Naval Children's Charity. As such, we recommend that charities publicise the availability and eligibility for means-tested support and include details about accessing financial support in deployment resources for families. We also recommend that barriers to accessing this support are reviewed, to ensure support is reaching those families who need it most.**

## Recommendations for research

**8. Research with young military children:** As our research was conducted during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, adherence to restrictions around social distancing meant that all data collection had to take place online. Due to the complexities of engaging children effectively in research, we took the decision to include children and young people between the ages of 11 and 21 years, who were deemed able to express themselves independently in a virtual interview or focus group. However, we

<sup>162</sup> Royal Navy. [Connected Forces Online Community](#). N.d.

<sup>163</sup> [Military New - Kings Camps](#)

<sup>161</sup> Ministry of Defence. [UK Armed Forces Families Strategy: 2022-2032](#). 2022

recognise that the experiences of younger children are likely to differ significantly in regard to using SM/IBC.

**We recommend that future research focuses on military children's communication with their serving parent includes children under the age of 11 years, and employs appropriate methods for engaging with these children and enabling them to express themselves (i.e., face-to-face, utilising creative activities).**

- 9. Research with other Service branches:** Our research focused on the Naval family's experience of SM/IBC during separation. Whilst it is likely that family's experiences are relevant to other Service branches, nuances in military life across Service branches (i.e., length and location of deployments, differences in 'weekending' and mobility) mean that findings cannot be directly applied without further research. Indeed, international research suggests that Naval families may experience more difficulties in communication than those in other Service branches, due to increased separation and poorer access to the internet during deployment on ships.

**We recommend that research investigating experiences of SM/IBC and managing virtual family relationships is undertaken with the British Army and Royal Air Force, to determine if challenges are replicated or differ between populations.**

- 10. Research with underrepresented Naval populations:** Our research suggests that Submariner families have a very different experience of communication compared to other Naval Arms, due to the restrictions on communication whilst on a Submarine. As such, the Submariner families were best described as non-users of SM/IBC during separation. However, we were only able to speak to two Submariner spouses/partners and their children, meaning further research is required to better understand the experience of this population. Furthermore, despite targeted recruitment strategies, we were unable to recruit any Royal Marine families for this research, meaning that the Royal Marine family experience of communication remains unexplored.

**We recommend that research is conducted investigating the experience of Submariner and Royal Marine families in using SM/IBC during separation. This will enable targeted support to be developed for these populations, who remain underrepresented in UK research.**

- 11. Research with Naval Personnel:** Whilst we were able to capture the experiences of Naval spouses/partners and children/young people within our research, we were prohibited from speaking to Naval personnel directly without MOD ethical approval. Whilst we attempted to obtain this approval, the nature and length of the process meant that this was not possible within the timeline of this project. As such, our findings related to Naval Personnel's experiences come indirectly through their at-home family members.

**We recommend that future research engages with the Royal Navy/other Service**

**branches, to ensure access to current Service Personnel. Engagement with military gatekeepers should occur as early as possible in the research process, to ensure that the length of the process and any delays do not impact the ability to include this population. This will enable us to explore the perspectives of this group in managing relationships with their family at home, and how this compares to the experience of spouses/partners and children. We further recommend that the experiences of male and female Service personnel are included, alongside analyses of differing experiences by gender.**

- 12. Quantitative research investigating how children/young people use SM/IBC:** Our review of the existing international literature identified gaps in our understanding of how military children utilise SM/IBC (i.e., what type do they use/prefer, how often do they communicate with their serving parent) and the impact SM/IBC of this on their wellbeing. Our qualitative data suggests a preference for synchronous communication (i.e., enabling communication in real-time) with their serving parent, but there is significant variation in frequency across families. Furthermore, whilst families highlighted the benefits and challenges of SM/IBC in facilitating parent-child virtual relationships, the direct impact of this on children's wellbeing is unclear.

**We recommend that quantitative research is undertaken to investigate children's use of SM/IBC to communicate with their serving parent, for example, using a diary study to determine preference and frequency. We further recommend research to explore how the frequency and type of SM/IBC used is related to children's wellbeing during and after separation from their serving parent. This will further support the development of targeted guidance and resources for maintaining virtual parent-child relationships.**



## Appendix 1: Focus Group Vignettes

### Vignette 1

My name is Adam, and my dad is a special person serving in the Royal Navy. His name is John, and he works on a Submarine somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, but I am not sure where exactly.

I was so sad when he left, I miss him so much. Don't get me wrong I am so proud that my dad works in the Royal Navy (I tell as many people as I can!), but I miss him when he isn't here, and I am scared. Scared something might happen to him.

I want to tell him what's been happening at school, about the goal I scored at the weekend and... well everything! I hate seeing all of the other dads at the school gates and I can't help but keep looking at all the faces in the hope that one of them is my dad! He misses so much when he goes away, I have learnt new things, I have a new friend and I have grown... I must look and feel like a different person to him when he comes home.

The Royal Navy have recommended that I complete a project to understand where he has been deployed which I have started but stopped doing... I just want to be able to message him whenever I want but I can't. I sometimes try to send him a text or a WhatsApp message just in case he can see them, but he never answers. When I don't hear back... it makes me worry that something is wrong, and he is hurt. I have started a memory box so I can put everything he has missed somewhere and then share it with him when he returns. But it's not the same as just messaging him whenever I want to.

I just can't wait for him to come home.

### Vignette 2

My name is Katarina, and I am an engineering officer on a ship in the Royal Navy. I am responsible for maintaining advanced kit working in a close-knit team and I love what I do. It is challenging and exciting and I am proud to be in the Royal Navy.

But I am also a mum of 2 children: Delia-Maria and Sebastian.

Leaving them at home is the hardest thing I have to do. I miss them every single day and hate that I am not always there to check they are ok. When I am on ships, I do get some communication with them which I love, but every time I speak to them or message them, it's like leaving them behind all over again. I worry that they will worry if they don't get an answer from me! I don't want them to think it's because I am not thinking about them? Or if I have to hang up suddenly or we lose communication altogether... It can make me even more home sick sometimes.

I hope they understand why I do what I do? I hope they understand that I am trying to

help to make the world a safer place for them and other children.

I can't wait to be home and hear properly what they have been up to and spend some real time with them. I love them with all my heart.

## Appendix 2: Methodology

### Scoping review

Arksey and O'Malley's (2005)<sup>164</sup> five step framework for scoping reviews was followed to answer the following question: *How do military families use internet-based communication and social media to communicate with their serving member, and what is the impact of this?*

No country limiters were applied in order to capture all papers available internationally. The search terms, outlined in Table 1, combined military specific terms, with child and family terms, and social media terms using Boolean logic. Due to the focus of this review on the impact of SM/IBC on children's family life, we did not include papers that focused on communication in spousal relationships only.

**Table 1. Search terms used for the scoping review**

Boolean Operator	Search Terms
Military specific terms	military OR army OR navy OR naval OR "royal marine" OR RAF OR "royal air force" OR "air force" OR airforce OR "3rd culture" OR "third culture" OR "service child*" OR "service famil*" OR "service kid"
AND Child & family terms	child* OR kid OR famil* OR "young people"

164 Arksey H, O'Malley L. *Scoping studies: towards a methodological framework*. International journal of social research methodology. 2005;8(1):19-32.



<b>AND</b> Social Media Terms	"social media Influence*" OR "social media" OR "Facebook" OR "Twitter" OR "Zoom" OR "Instagram" OR "TikTok" OR "Whatsapp" OR "BBM" OR "Facebook messenger" OR "Facetime" OR "Skype" OR "Snapchat" OR "video conferencing" OR "video chat" OR "direct messag*" OR "internet-based communication" OR "internet-based communication" OR "instant messag*" OR "online communication" OR "networked media"
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The following databases and Google Scholar were searched: PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus and Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Gale, ERIC and the Education database. As well as desktop searching for grey literature. A separate search of communication specific journals on JSTOR was undertaken due to differing search formats.

Initial database searches returned 475 papers and two from other sources, once duplicates were removed 402 papers remained. After a review for relevancy of titles and abstracts, 87 papers remained, including additional texts identified from forward and backward citation searching.

A full text review of the remaining papers was undertaken assessing the eligibility of the papers for inclusion based on the criteria in Table 2. 11 papers met the full inclusion criteria. No further quality assessment stage was undertaken, in line with Arksey & O'Malley's framework, which aims to gather the greatest "range of study designs and methodologies" possible (Arksey and O'Malley 2005, 30). A robust outline of the limitation of the evidence collected is provided in [Appendix 5](#).

<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<p>Papers of any methodology are to be included, bar reviews.</p> <p>Directly investigates the impact the use of social media by Service families.</p> <p>Original research with primary data published in peer reviewed journals, grey literature and governmental reports are to be included.</p> <p>No limiters will be applied to date published.</p>
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<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>	<p>Articles not written in English.</p> <p>Article addresses issues other than the use of social media by Service families.</p> <p>Article explores the use of social media by civilian families.</p> <p>Review Articles. References of review papers will be scoped to ensure all papers that fit the inclusion criteria therein are included.</p>
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Four additional papers (primarily postgraduate dissertations) of potential relevance were identified in the databases searches but are not included in this scope due to difficulty accessing their full text <sup>165 166 167 168</sup>. Unsuccessful efforts were made to contact authors and to obtain the papers directly from the British Library.

The papers were analysed thematically to identify the key issues and experiences emerging from the literature.

## Interviews and focus groups

The authors conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with to explore families' experiences methods with:

- Children of currently serving Naval personnel aged between 11-21
- Spouses or long-term partners, including those in blended families, of currently serving Naval personnel, who have children under the age of 21

Ethical approval for the interviews with service children/young people and spouses/partners was obtained from the ARU faculty and school research ethics committees.<sup>169</sup>

For the service children focus groups and interviews, a series of vignettes was deployed in order to help facilitate deeper discussion about the experiences of communication during parent-child relationships. The content of the vignettes is shown in [Appendix 1](#).

For a small number of young people (3) aged over 18 the research team used a

165 Blasko KA, Murphy PR. Military parenting in the digital age: Existing practices, new possibilities. In *Parenting and Children's Resilience in Military Families*. 2016 (pp. 265-282). Springer.

166 Fletcher AM. Lived experiences of married active-duty Navy SEAL fathers. Alliant International University; 2014.

167 Matthews-Juarez P, Juarez PD, Faulkner RT. Social media and military families: A perspective. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*. 2013 Aug 1;23(6):769-76.

168 Spector E. The impact of advanced communications technology on military deployment: A phenomenological exploration (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology). 2013.

169 Note that the research team originally planned to speak to a third group: currently serving Naval personnel. However, an initial application to the Naval Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) was subsequently withdrawn following review, due to challenges experienced in communicating the qualitative methodology to the SAC review panel. It was determined that the length and nature of this process would not be feasible within the timeline of the project.



variation on the partner interview protocol below, to allow for a more age-appropriate discussion with these young adults of their communication experiences.

Partner interviews were semi-structured and focused on the experience of family communication, the main positives, challenges and how social media and internet-based communication differs from traditional communication, and support or changes that families thought could help improve communication (if any).

Demographic data was collected via email from spouses/partners to allow for consideration of differences related to rank, role, length of service, service branch, age and gender of children, family make-up, and whether the family lived apart routinely ("weekending") etc. This detail was collected from children/young people during the interviews and focus groups, with any missing detail obtained from parents via email. Participant characteristics are shown in [Appendix 4](#).

All interviews and focus groups were conducted remotely over Microsoft Teams, due to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic. Where both parents and their children participated, they were interviewed separately. All spousal/partner were interviewed one on one. Focus group were held with multiple children where possible, however due to schedules five children were interviewed one on one.

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analysed using a thematic analysis framework<sup>170</sup> by the research team.

## Appendix 3. Scoping review paper characteristics

Our international scoping review predominately identified U.S focused literature (7), with a small number of papers exploring the U.K context (3) and one paper originating in Canada. All Service branches were represented in the literature, with the majority of the literature (US-based) including all or multiple of branches.

Branch	Number of Papers
US All	2
US Multiple	2
US National Guard	2
US Army	1
UK All	1

170 Braun V, Clarke V. [Using thematic analysis in psychology](#). *Qualitative research in psychology*. 2006 ;3(2):77-101.

UK Royal Navy, Royal Marines	2
Canada All	1

TABLE X: Breakdown of papers by Service branch.

All identified papers explored families' experience of social media and internet-based communication, with the majority of papers looking at the Service family as a unit, rather than specifically at the parent-child relationship. However, only four studies included Service children in their sample as participants<sup>171 172 173 174</sup>, with most papers in this review capturing children's experience through parental report. Three papers focused on differing aspects of family's experiences, with one paper specifically exploring parent-child communication, one becoming a father during deployment, and the final the experience of Serving persons. All papers bar one<sup>175</sup> discussed social media and internet-based communication within a wider focus on general communication or other topics.

## Appendix 4: Sample characteristics

The following tables show the characteristics of the two samples.

**Table 1. Spouse/partner characteristics**

Interviewee	Age of children	Gender of children	Partner's Naval Arm	Partner's Rank
1	5 years	Male	Surface fleet	Commissioned
2	2 years, 4 years	Male	Fleet Air Arm	Commissioned
3	8 years, 12 years	Male	Surface fleet	Non-Commissioned
4	5 years, 6 years	Female	Surface fleet	Commissioned
5	15 years, 15 years	Male and female	Surface fleet	Commissioned

171 Atwood, K. [Maintaining "the Family" During Deployment: Presence Work by Military Families](#). 2014.

172 Children's Commissioner. [Kin and Country](#). 2018.

173 Goodney, R. [A mixed methods study of technological influences on communication and media exposure in military children experiencing parental deployment](#). 2014.

174 Gribble R and Fear NT. [The Effect of non-operational family separation on family functioning and wellbeing among Royal Navy/Royal Marines Families](#). 2019.

175 Goodney, R. 2014. See above.



6	10 years, 19 months	Female	Surface fleet	Non-Commissioned
7	7 years, 3 years	Male and female	Surface fleet	Commissioned
8	8 years	Male	Surface fleet	Non-Commissioned
9	7 years, 5 years	Male	Fleet Air Arm	Non-Commissioned
10	5 years	Female	Unknown	Non-Commissioned
11	9 years, 12 years	Male and female	Surface fleet	Commissioned
12	17 years, 21 years	Male and female	Surface fleet	Non-Commissioned
13	13 years, 11 years, 3 years, 5 months	N/A*	Submarine Service	N/A*
14	11 years, 9 years, 11 months	N/A*	Submarine Service	N/A*
15	15 years, 13 years	Male and female	Surface fleet	Non-Commissioned
16	12 years, 20 years	Female	Fleet Air Arm	Non-Commissioned
17	15 years, 17 years, 18 years	Male	Surface fleet	Unknown
18	15 years, 18 years	Male and female	Medical Services	Commissioned
19	13 years, 16 years	Male	Surface fleet	Non-Commissioned
20	7 years	Male	Fleet Air Arm	Commissioned
21	3 years, 8 years	Female	Surface fleet	Commissioned

\*Redacted to ensure anonymity.

**Table 2. Children/young people**

Participant Number	Age (years)	Gender	Gender of serving family member	Naval Arm, role and/or rank of serving parent*
1	14	Female	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Commissioned
2	12	Male	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Commissioned
3	13	Female	Male (Stepfather)	Surface fleet, Engineer
4	15	Male	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Commissioned
5	17	Female	Male (father and brother)	Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned
6	12	Male	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned
7	13	Male	Male (father)	Submariner, Commissioned
8	15	Female	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Engineer
9	18	Female	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned
10	21	Female	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Commissioned
11	11	Male	Male (father)	Submariner, Commissioned
12	15	Female	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned
13	15	Female	Male (father)	Medical Services, Commissioned
14	15	Female	Male (father)	Unknown
15	13	Male	Male (father)	Unknown
16	13	Male	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned
17	16	Male	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned
18	11	Female	Male (father) Female (mother)	Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned
19	11	Female	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Commissioned
20	15	Male	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned



21	17	Male	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Non-Commissioned
22	20	Female	Male (father)	Fleet Air Arm, Non-Commissioned
23	13	Female	Male (father)	Fleet Air Arm, Non-Commissioned
24	14	Male	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Commissioned
25	12	Male	Male (father)	Surface fleet, Commissioned

\*Naval Arm, rank and role of serving parent are not available for all children and young people, as they were not always able to recall this information during interviews/focus groups.

## Appendix 5: Limitations of the international literature

Most studies identified in our international scoping review used parental report to capture the experience of Service children, with only four studies including children as participants. This potentially limits our understanding of the child's experience of SM/IBC as it relies on parents' perceived knowledge or observation and therefore might not be fully reflective of children's experience. The potential for difference in parent and children's understanding of the child's experience was evident in our data collection and is discussed in more detail in the Limitations section of the Discussion, highlighting the importance of including of including Service children's voices in research directly.

The literature returned by the scoping search was US dominated (7 out of 11 papers), limiting the generalisability of the findings to the UK context due to significant differences in communication infrastructures, deployment lengths, locations, support provisions and healthcare systems and social and military cultures. Further to this, the nature of military research meant some studies looked at specific military branches, which may also limit the generalisability of the findings.

Covid-19 has significantly altered the exposure of many families to video-based communication methods. The scope identified research from 2010-2019 (majority published after 2014) and therefore is broadly representative of recent SM/IBC technologies. No papers were returned from 2020-21 and therefore our scoping review does not reflect the impact of Covid-19 and any very recent developments of SM/IBC methods. Alongside this, we were unable to access 4 additional papers that were identified as part of our search as potentially relevant, consisting of mainly postgraduate dissertations, due to an unsuccessful effort to contact authors and obtain papers via the British Library<sup>176 177 178 179</sup>.

Finally, several studies had small sample sizes<sup>180</sup>, and would therefore benefit from additional research to establish these findings amongst a larger population.



176 Blasko KA, Murphy PR. Military parenting in the digital age: Existing practices, new possibilities. In *Parenting and Children's Resilience in Military Families*. 2016 (pp. 265-282). Springer.

177 Fletcher AM. Lived experiences of married active-duty Navy SEAL fathers. Alliant International University; 2014.

178 Matthews-Juarez P, Juarez PD, Faulkner RT. Social media and military families: A perspective. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*. 2013 Aug 1;23(6):769-76.

179 Spector E. The impact of advanced communications technology on military deployment: A phenomenological exploration (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology). 2013.

180 Durham S.W. *In their own words: Staying connected in a combat environment*. *Military Medicine*. 2010. 1;175(8):554-9. Konowitz, S. *Understanding How Army National Guard Families with Children Cope with Deployments*. 2013. Seidel, A. J., Franks, M. M., Murphy, G. F., & Wadsworth, S. M. *Bridging the distance: Illustrations of real-time communication of support between partners and deployed members of the national guard*. 2014; In *Military Deployment and its Consequences for Families* (pp. 21-35).



## About ARU

Ranked in the world's top 350 institutions in the 2021 Times Higher Education World University Rankings, ARU is a global university transforming lives through innovative, inclusive and entrepreneurial education and research.

ARU's research institutes and four faculties bridge scientific, technical and creative fields. We deliver impactful research which tackles pressing issues and makes a real difference to our communities. Our academic excellence has been recognised by the UK's Higher Education funding bodies, with 12 of our research areas assessed as world-leading.

We are the largest provider of Nursing, Midwifery, Health and Social Care students in England, and we are among the UK's leading universities for degree apprenticeship provision, working with employers including Barclays, Vinci and GlaxoSmithKline.

## About Naval Childrens Charity

The Naval Children's Charity has been helping Naval Children since 1825, for nearly 200 years. We help children, up to the age of 25, whose parents have served in the Naval Service (Royal Navy, Royal Marines, QARNNS, WRNS, Reserves or Royal Fleet Auxiliary).

We help around 2000 children directly each year and many thousands more through our resources and work with communities and other organisations.

We believe that to be the child of someone who is, or has been, in the Naval Service should be a positive and enhancing experience – something to be borne with pride. For those children where life is more difficult, we are there to help.