



**BLUE STAR  
FAMILIES**

**MILITARY  
FAMILY  
LIFESTYLE  
SURVEY**

# 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

## Finding 11

Funding for the 2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey is provided through the generosity of our presenting sponsor USAA and from supporting sponsors Lockheed Martin, AARP, CSX, Hunt Companies, BAE Systems, The Barry Robinson Center, Comcast, Northrop Grumman, Walmart Foundation, and The Boeing Company.

In collaboration with

**S** Syracuse University

**Institute for Veterans  
& Military Families**

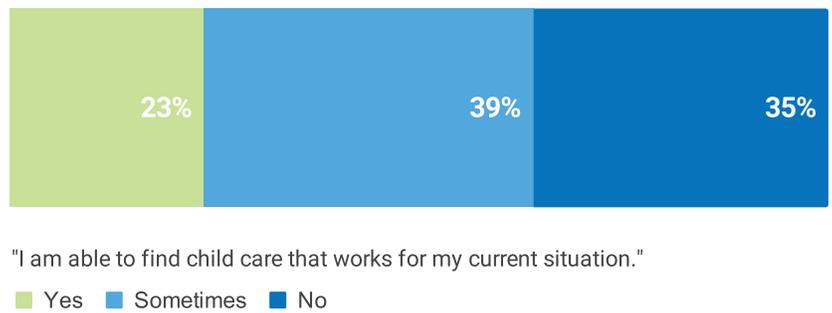
JPMorgan Chase & Co., Founding Partner

# Work flexibility, alternative care options, and increasing child care affordability are active-duty families' preferred solutions for addressing child care and schooling concerns.

Child care has been, and continues to be, a top issue for a quarter (24%) of military family respondents. Further, it is recognized as a critical issue by the Department of Defense for all military families.<sup>1,2</sup> The inability to access affordable, quality child care is a barrier to military spouse employment, which also impacts the financial well-being of military families,<sup>3,4</sup> particularly during this past year with the impact of COVID-19 on schools and child care centers. Active-duty family respondents, however, have noted some possible solutions that can help ease some of the barriers to accessing child care.

### Ability to Find Child Care

Active-duty Family Respondents with a Child Care Need

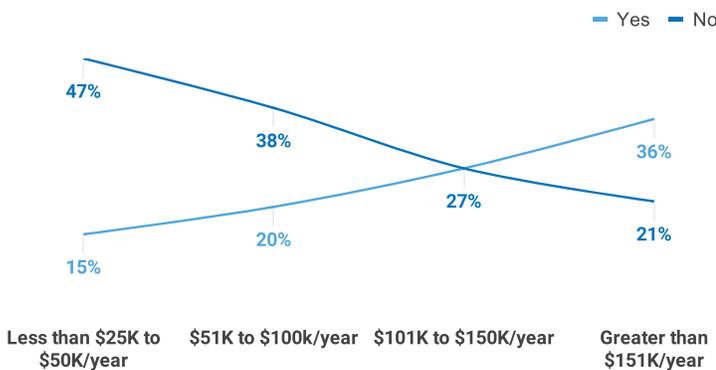


Most active-duty family respondents have children under the age of 18 (80%) at home, and among those, 65% need child care at least some of the time. Of those with a need, 23% reported always being able

to find child care that works for their situation; however, that number falls to 19% for respondents with a special needs child.

### Ability to Find Child Care by Household Income

Active-duty Family Respondents with a Child Care Need



In line with 2019 MFLS findings, child care costs continue to be a concern. Of those active-duty family respondents who reported being financially stressed and have a need for child care, out-of-pocket child care costs are the most commonly reported contributor to financial stress (31%). Unfortunately, having a higher level of income does not solve the whole problem. Although

active-duty military family respondents in lower income brackets had greater difficulty accessing child care, respondents across all income levels reported child care was a need that was often out of their

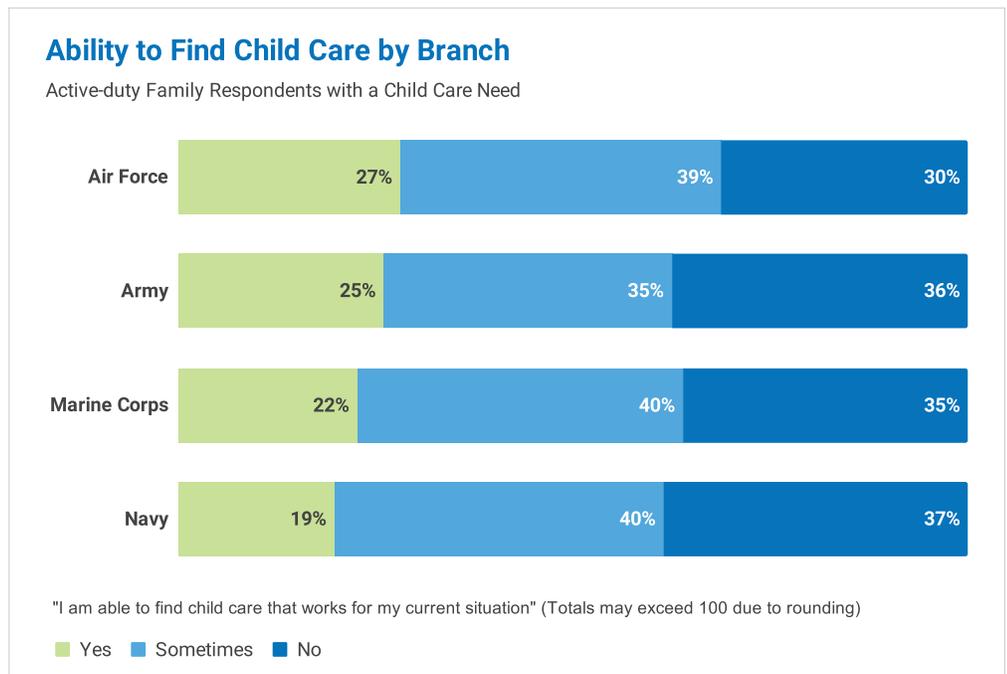
“[The Child Development Center] (CDC) closed during [the] base lockdown due to COVID, so my husband and I were attempting to both work from home with two young children at home. I moved/started geo-batching, and [the] CDC in [the] new location is not accepting any children, **local child care is not up to the same standard and not open long enough hours.**” — Air Force Spouse

grasp. Child care expenses remain a top barrier to spouse employment, with 34% of active-duty spouse respondents who are not working but need to work stating “child care is too expensive.” Furthermore, child care accessibility and affordability impacts female active-duty service members to a greater degree than their male peers. One-third (33%) of female active-duty service members ranked “lack of child care” among their top five military life issues, compared to only 15% of male active-duty peers. There were also differences by branch, with a greater proportion of respondents associated with the Navy and Marine Corps reporting more difficulty accessing child care, in line with previous reports.<sup>5,6</sup>

Barriers to child care were further exacerbated during COVID-19 with the closure of child care facilities and schools, which meant families with school-aged children were unable to utilize after school care. Furthermore, a child care system that prioritizes

essential workers prevented many, if not most, active-duty families from accessing child care.<sup>7</sup> Forty-two percent of active-duty spouse respondents who were working prior to the pandemic reported they had stopped working at some point during COVID-19, and 49% reported they had reduced their work hours. Over a quarter (29%) of active-duty spouse respondents who had stopped working since COVID-19 began cited they “did not have child care” as one of the reasons. Lack of child care was also a reason for 37% of spouses who reduced their work hours during COVID-19.

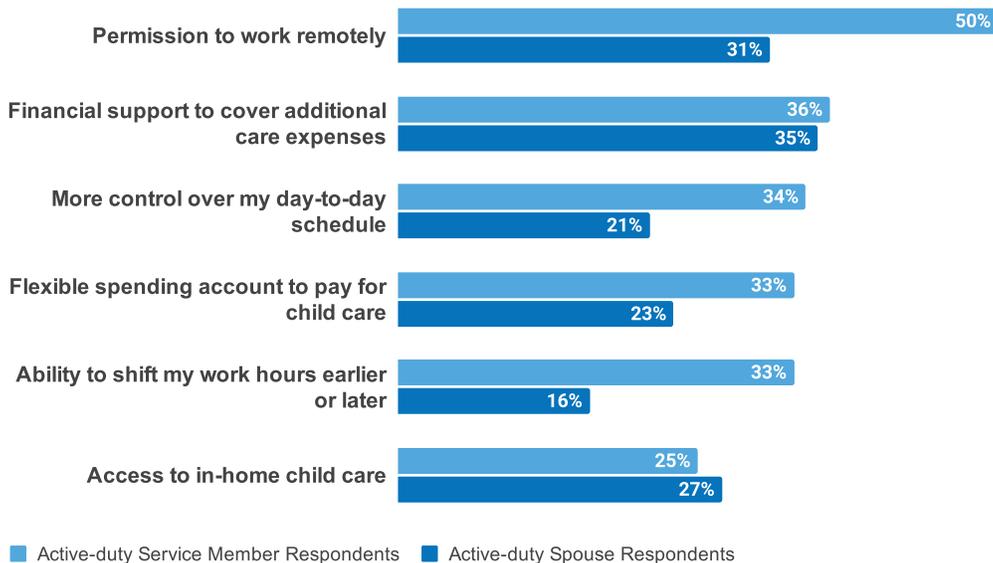
Limited child care access also impacted families with school-aged children. Inability to juggle work and children’s educational support was a primary reason cited by 30% of those who stopped working and half (49%) of those who reduced their work hours. Of active-duty family respondents who experienced challenges with child care during COVID-19 and have children eligible for K-12 education, 16% reported the inability of the child care facility to support their child(ren)’s virtual school learning as a challenge. Like their civilian peers,<sup>8</sup> the COVID-19 pandemic challenged many active-duty spouses’ ability to balance employment and children.



“Ability for my active-duty member to reliably be home to assist. This is something technically supported by the command but is difficult to count on in practice.” — Air Force Spouse

## Preferred Solutions to Alleviate Schooling and Child Care Difficulties

Active-duty Service Member and Spouse Respondents



Active-duty family respondents, however, noted potential solutions for alleviating current schooling and child care issues, although solutions from active-duty spouse respondents differed from service members' solutions. Amongst the top proposed solutions were work flexibility, child care flexibility, and increasing affordability. Predictable service member schedules also

made it easier to find child care that would work for the family's situation. Active-duty family respondents who agreed their service member's schedule was predictable had fewer challenges accessing child care during COVID-19 than those who disagreed (53% versus 36%). Work predictability, flexibility, and child care affordability would alleviate both service members' and active-duty spouses' challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



### CONGRESS

- Commission a report on the demand for various child care options among military families and assess the pros/cons of requiring families to first seek care at their local CDC before being authorized to use Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) fee assistance.\*
- Enhance and expand access to fee assistance programs (e.g., to military families who wish to enroll their child in a child care facility that is state licensed, even if it is not nationally accredited).



### CONGRESS AND MILITARY

- Enable innovative public-private partnerships (e.g., commercial leasing and/or purchasing child care slots at local civilian child care providers) as recommended by Weber and Grobe.<sup>9</sup>
- Allow service members flexible work options such as telework, control over day-to-day schedules, and the ability to shift work hours as able.



### MILITARY

- Implement Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts (DCFSAs) to allow service members to use pre-tax dollars to pay for child care, as recommended by the Military Officers Association of America and the National Military Family Association.

## LIMITATIONS

While not representative of the active-duty population as a whole, this large sample of active-duty family respondents who have children under 18 living at home and indicated they need child care (n=1,950) provides compelling insight into the impacts of COVID-19 on child care and, in particular, impacts of child care challenges for families with children who have special needs as well as possible solutions to help alleviate those challenges. In answer to the prompt “I am able to find childcare for my current situation” respondents were able to select “Yes,” “Sometimes,” “No,” or “Other.” “Other” responses were excluded from graphs. As a result, the sum of the individual response categories does not equal 100%.

\*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

1. Government Accountability Office. (2012). *DOD Is Taking Actions to Address Awareness and Availability Barriers* (GAO-12-21). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
2. Government Accountability Office. (2020). *Off-Base Financial Assistance and Wait Lists for On-Base Care* (GAO-21-127R). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.  
<https://www.gao.gov/assets/720/710951.pdf>
3. Blue Star Families. (2020). *2019 Military Family Lifestyle Comprehensive Report*. <https://bluestarfam.org/survey>
4. United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation. (2017). *Military Spouses in the Workplace: Understanding the Impacts of Spouse Unemployment on Military Recruitment, Retention, and Readiness*. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Military%20Spouses%20in%20the%20Workplace.pdf>
5. Congressional Research Service. (2020). *Military Child Development Program: Background and Issues*. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R45288.pdf>
6. Government Accountability Office. (2020). *Off-Base Financial Assistance and Wait Lists for On-Base Care* (GAO-21-127R). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.  
<https://www.gao.gov/assets/720/710951.pdf>
7. Bitler, M., Hoynes, H. W., & Whitmore-Schanzenbach, D. (2020). *The Social Safety net in the Wake of COVID-19*. National Bureau of Economic Research.  
[https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w27796/w27796.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w27796/w27796.pdf)
8. Bateman, N., & Ross, M. (2020). *Why has COVID-19 been especially harmful for working women?* The Brookings Institution.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/essay/why-has-covid-19-been-especially-harmful-for-working-women>
9. Weber, R.B., & Grobe, D. (2015). *Contracted Slots Pilot Program Evaluation*. Oregon State University, Family Policy Program. <https://health.oregonstate.edu/sites/health.oregonstate.edu/files/occrp/pdf/cs-final-report-11-30-2015.pdf>