

Effects of Relocation to a New School on Children and Adolescents in Military Families

Thomas J. Berndt, Purdue University

and Jennifer J. Thomas, Wilkes University

Abstract

To investigate the effects on children and adolescents of relocation to a new school and community, more than 1,100 third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, and twelfth graders were assessed in the fall and spring of a school year. All students had at least one parent who was in the U.S. Armed Forces. In the fall, some students had been in their current school district for less than 4 months; others had been in the district for 4-12 months or for a longer time. Students in the district less than four months showed poorer academic adjustment (e.g., lower report-card grades) than students who had been in the district for a longer time. New students also showed poorer social adjustment (e.g., less positive perceptions of their social acceptance) but not more problem behaviors than other students did. These findings suggest that academic adjustment to a new school normally takes a full academic year. Changes in social adjustment are more variable. Classmates reported improvements in newcomers' behavior during the school year, but even students who had been in the school district for 4-12 months perceived their social acceptance as lower than did students who have been in the district for more than two years.

Introduction

Millions of children and adolescents in the U.S. move to a new school and community each year. Relocation to a new school can be stressful, because newcomers to a school must learn about new school routines and academic standards. They must also become part of a new peer group and form new relationships with their classmates.

Determining exactly how children and adolescents are affected by relocation to a new school is difficult. To examine these effects, some researchers have compared students who differ in the number of times they have moved to new schools. These comparisons are problematic because families who move frequently often differ in important characteristics from families who are more stable. For example, low-SES families often move because they have lost their jobs, cannot afford their current housing arrangements, or want to search for better-paying jobs in a new community.

The purpose of this study was to assess the effects of relocation not by comparing students who differ in the number of moves they have made but by examining the immediate effects of a recent move. The study focused on students with a parent in the military, because military families generally expect to move about once every three years. Because moving is common in these families, the students who move to a new school in any given year are unlikely to differ systematically from those who moved one or two years earlier. It is possible, therefore, to examine the immediate effects of relocation on students' adjustment to school by comparing the adjustment of military students in their first year in a new school with that of students who were in that school for the previous year or years.

Method

Participants. In the fall of a school year, more than 1,200 students in the third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, and twelfth grades who had at least one parent in the military were recruited for a study of students' adjustment after a military move. The students' parents were stationed at Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marine Corps military bases throughout the United States. In the spring of the same school year, more than 1,100 of these students were asked to participate in the second and final phase of data collection for the study. Nearly all of the students not participating in the spring data collection had moved to new schools, usually because a military parent was transferred to a new base.

Procedure. In the fall of a school year, the students completed a questionnaire in which they indicated how long they had been in their current school district. They also reported on various aspects of their academic and social adjustment. Other information was obtained from the students' parents and teachers, and from their report cards. The assessments were repeated the next spring, to see how students' adjustment changed over time.

Student's academic adjustment was assessed with the following measures:

- Grade-point average (GPA), which was calculated using all the grades recorded on the students' record cards for the grading period closest to the fall or spring assessments
- Teacher-rated academic competence, which was based on responses by one of the student's teachers to items from the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990)
- Student's perceptions of their academic competence, judged from their responses on Harter's (1985) Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC)
- Students' reports of their classroom involvement, judged from their responses to Berndt & Keefe's (1995) measure.

Students' social adjustment was assessed with the following measures:

- Teacher-rated social skills and problem behaviors, based on a teacher's responses to the SSRS
- Peer-nominated popularity/leadership and peer-nominated problem behaviors, based on the responses of other participating students in the same grade and school to the items on the Revised Class Play (Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985). The number of nominations that students received on the items linked to each measure was standardized within each grade, gender, and school.
- Parents' reports of their children's social skills and problem behaviors, based on one or both parents' responses to the parent form of the SSRS
- Students' perceptions of their social acceptance and behavioral conduct, judged from their responses on the SPPC.

Results

Of the 1,137 students in the final sample for this short-term longitudinal study, 10% (N = 113) reported that they had been in their current school district for less than 4 months. These students were considered as newcomers to the district and to their current school. Another 22% of the sample had been in their current school district for 4 to 12 months; virtually all of them had been in the same school during the previous academic year. Another 21% of the students reported having been in their current district for 1 to 2 years. The remaining students (47%) students reported that they had been in their district more than 2 years. The primary analyses of the effects of relocation examined the differences among these four groups of students.

Effects of relocation on academic adjustment. Newcomers to the school, who had been in the school district less than 4 months, showed poorer academic adjustment than those who had been in the school district for a longer time (see Table 1). The newcomers had lower report-card grades and were rated by teachers as less academically competent than students who had been in the district longer. Not surprisingly, they also perceived themselves as less academically competent and reported less positive involvement in school, although newcomers' involvement only differed significantly from that of students who had been in the school district for more than two years.

Table 1
Mean Scores for the Academic Adjustment of Students Who Had Been in the School District for Different Amounts of Time

Time in the Current School District	Adjustment Measure			
	Grade-Point Average	Teacher-rated Academic Competence	Self-Perceived Academic Competence	Positive Involvement
<i>Less than 4 months</i>	2.77 _a	3.37 _a	2.81 _a	3.33 _a
<i>4 – 12 months</i>	3.02 _b	3.78 _b	3.00 _{bc}	3.37 _a
<i>1 – 2 years</i>	3.02 _b	3.78 _b	2.94 _{ab}	3.43 _{ab}
<i>More than 2 years</i>	3.03 _b	3.81 _b	3.05 _c	3.46 _b

Note. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Table 1 shows means for the average of the fall and spring assessments because the group differences did not change significantly over time. The nonsignificant changes suggest that newcomers did not improve substantially in their academic adjustment during the school year. Table 1 does not show means for each grade or each sex because repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) did not show any consistent differences in the apparent effects of relocation on older vs. younger students or on boys vs. girls.

Effects of relocation on social adjustment. The effects of relocation on students' social adjustment were more complex (see Table 2). Newcomers to their schools rated their social acceptance less positively than other students did. Indeed, students' perceptions of their social acceptance improved steadily, although not always significantly, the longer that students had been in their school district.

Table 2

Mean Scores for the Social Adjustment of Students Who Had Been in the School District for Different Amounts of Time

Time in the Current School District	Adjustment Measure				
	Self-Perceived Social Acceptance	Peer-Nominated Popularity-Leadership: Fall	Peer-Nominated Popularity-Leadership: Spring	Teacher-Rated Social Skills: Girls	Teacher-Rated Social Skills: Boys
<i>Less than 4 months</i>	2.74 _a	-.33 _a	-.18 _a	2.40 _a	2.47 _a
<i>4 – 12 months</i>	2.86 _{ab}	-.07 _b	-.03 _{ab}	2.65 _b	2.42 _a
<i>1 – 2 years</i>	2.93 _{bc}	.04 _{bc}	.01 _{ab}	2.63 _b	2.47 _a
<i>More than 2 years</i>	2.98 _c	.11 _c	.04 _b	2.62 _b	2.48 _a

Note. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

In the fall, peer nominations for behaviors reflecting a student's popularity and leadership showed the same pattern as for self-perceived social acceptance (see Table 2). The standardized scores for newcomers' popularity and leadership were significantly more negative than those for other students, and these scores increased steadily although not always significantly the longer students had been in their school district. Repeated measures ANOVAs showed, however, that the standardized scores for newcomers improved significantly between the fall and the spring, indicated that these students developed a more positive reputation with their classmates during the school year.

Teachers' ratings of students' social skills showed a different pattern. Teachers rated girls new to the school district as lower in social skills than the other groups of girls. By contrast, teachers' ratings of the social skills of all groups of boys did not differ significantly from those of newcomer girls. One possible interpretation of these findings is that the difficulties that girls have in adjusting to a new set of classmates are more obvious to teachers than are the comparable difficulties of boys. This interpretation in terms of teachers' perceptions seems plausible because sex differences in the apparent effects of relocation were not found for the other measures of social adjustment.

In addition, some nonsignificant differences between the newcomers and other students need to be mentioned explicitly.

Newcomers were not significantly different from other groups of students in their perceptions of their behavioral conduct, their nominations by classmates for problem behaviors, their teachers' ratings of their problem behaviors, or their parents' reports on their social skills and problem behaviors. The nonsignificant results for parents' reports might be viewed as showing that parents were largely unaware of their children's difficulties at school, but the results for self-reports, peer nominations, and teachers' ratings cannot be attributed to the biased perceptions of a one set of informants. Instead, those results suggest that newcomers to a school did not generally display more problem behaviors than other students did. Stated differently, problem behaviors appear not to increase during the time that students are adjusting to the social world of a new school.

Conclusions

Although the sample for this study was limited to students with a parent in the military, the major findings are likely to hold for most children and adolescents who move to a new school because their family has relocated to a new community. Those findings suggest that:

- Students' academic adjustment to a new school typically takes a full school year—but no longer. In both the fall and the spring of the school year, new students showed poorer academic adjustment than students who had been in the school the previous year, but academic adjustment differed little for students who had been in the school district only for the previous year and students who had been in the district for two or more years.

- Students' social adjustment to a new school improves during their first year in the school, but further improvements occur during their second year. Classmates' judgments of newcomers' popularity and leadership were more positive in the spring of the school year than in the fall. However, students who had been in the school district only for the previous year viewed themselves as less socially accepted than did students who had been in the district more than two years.
- Relocation to a new school did not appear to have long-term or enduring effects on students' adjustment. By the time students had been in their school district for one or two years, their academic and social adjustment differed little from that of students who had been in the district for more than two years. These findings suggest that most children and adolescents fully adjusted to their new schools in a year or two. The findings further suggest that even repeated relocation, if there is sufficient time between moves, may not have any long-term negative effects on students' adjustment.

References

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