



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE  
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

# **Operationalizing *Strong, Secure, Engaged*: The Child Soldier Dimension**

by Lindsay Coombs  
June 2018

# POLICY UPDATE

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## **OPERATIONALIZING *STRONG, SECURE, ENGAGED*: THE CHILD SOLDIER DIMENSION**

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Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
1800, 421 – 7th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 4K9  
[www.cgai.ca](http://www.cgai.ca)

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ISBN: 978-1-77397-022-6



The security atmosphere of the twenty-first century is fraught with new and complex challenges with which military personnel deployed overseas must be familiarized through training and education initiatives. Of these challenges, the use of children as soldiers has created pressing security- and mental health-related concerns for professional militaries like the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Accordingly, in March 2017 the Canadian military released “Joint Doctrine Note 2017-01, Child Soldiers” (JDN 2017-01) to address various issues regarding these children. Designed to provide formal guidance to individuals, units and commanders on how to approach engagements with children in conflict, JDN 2017-01 is intended to support the ongoing transformation of the CAF and guide the professional development of its personnel. The doctrine note is also connected to a series of initiatives aimed at advancing one of the many objectives outlined in Canada’s latest defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* – preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers.<sup>1</sup> While the doctrine note has been heralded as the first of its kind, its method of implementation remains undefined.

Prior to the creation of JDN 2017-01, issues concerning child soldiers were largely unaddressed in Canadian military training and education.<sup>2</sup> This created situations in which military personnel were ill-prepared to deal with the complex nuances of the threat environments in which they have been deployed. Issues concerning child soldiers were not contained in the pre-deployment training instructions provided by Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) for the army, navy, and air force. This is significant because CJOC is responsible for the management of all force employment during both domestic and international operations. In short, this means that CJOC provides detailed direction for deployment preparation across the entire spectrum of military operations.<sup>3</sup> As part of this, CJOC gives formation instructions to each of the services regarding pre-deployment activities for specific operations, as well as directives to maintain standard readiness through training and education. Given the subject of child soldiers was not included in this material, the topic was not a standardized component of CAF training and education material.

Topics on child soldiers were also not part of the Individual Battle Task Standards (IBTS) for the army or navy. These directives provide the content and measurements for pre-deployment army and navy individual training. Notably, the air force does not have a service-specific IBTS; instead, it uses CJOC’s training direction as the main standard for individual readiness for deployed operations. IBTS training normally occurs during pre-deployment preparation and, to a certain extent, on an annual basis. Altogether, this means that issues concerning child soldiers were not an aspect of standardized CAF training and education, either as directed by CJOC or as a

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Canada, “The Vancouver Principles,” last modified April 25, 2018, [http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_developpement-enjeux\\_developpement/human\\_rights-droits\\_homme/principles-vancouver-principes.aspx?lang=eng](http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes.aspx?lang=eng).

<sup>2</sup> See Lindsay Coombs, “Are They Children? Or Are They Soldiers? Preparing the Canadian Military for the Contemporary Security Environment,” *The Royal Canadian Military Institute (RCMI) General Sir William Otter Paper* 16, no. 1 (December 2016): 1-10.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Johnston, Chris Madsen, Paul Mitchell, and Steven Moritsugu, “A Canadian Approach to Command at the Operational Level,” *Canadian Military Journal* 14, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 6-7; Bernd Horn and Bill Bentley, *Forced to Change: Crisis and Reform in the Canadian Armed Forces* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2015); and Canada, Department of National Defence, “Canadian Joint Operations Command,” last modified December 8, 2016, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/about-org-structure/canadian-joint-operations-command.page>.



component of individual training standards, nor were they a systematized component of pre-deployment training.<sup>4</sup>

With regards to mental health initiatives, the CAF also did not provide specific preparation for personnel to psychologically cope with encountering child soldiers. However, pre-deployment mental health briefs did include a perfunctory acknowledgement that child soldiers could constitute an extreme challenge in combat situations. Similarly, child soldiers were not included in post-deployment mental health assessments, like the Enhanced Post-Deployment Screening (EPDS) process, which is designed to help individuals with deployment-related health problems get into care more rapidly. Prior to the establishment of JDN 2017-01, some segments of the EPDS process included: (1) portions of a patient health questionnaire which assessed physical symptoms of operational stress injuries (OSI) like depression, suicidality, panic disorder and generalized anxiety, and (2) the review of a patient checklist for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Despite the fact that the patient health questionnaire is supposed to identify OSIs more generally, most of the questions concerning mental health appeared to be specifically geared towards determining if a soldier is showing symptoms of PTSD. These questions primarily revolved around feelings of fear, helplessness and involvement in horrific events. However, there were no questions related to other types of OSIs, like moral injuries, which would focus on issues of trust, feelings of guilt or shame, or the transgression of deeply held beliefs. While many of the symptoms of PTSD and moral injuries overlap, it is important to note that they are distinct conditions.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, questions designed to identify PTSD may not uncover moral injuries. Furthermore, even though there were a few questions posed during the EPDS process that asked about engagements with civilians, or if the soldier had difficulty distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants, there were no questions concerning child soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

Evidently, CAF training and education on the topic of child soldiers was inadequate. In order to better prepare CAF personnel for the military activities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it became clear that doctrinal innovation was required. JDN 2017-01 was created with the aim of addressing these deficiencies in CAF training and education. Accordingly, it not only provides guidance for the planning and execution of operations, but also outlines Canada's approach to training and educating military personnel on the subject of child soldiers.

In the doctrine note the issue of child soldiers is considered within the broader context of vulnerable populations. Although the concept of vulnerable populations is not new to the CAF, acknowledging and protecting child soldiers as a vulnerable group is a core component of JDN 2017-01.<sup>7</sup> Further, the doctrine note's acknowledgment of the need for child soldiering to be

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, although the topic of child soldiers was not a standardized aspect of CAF training in 2016, it was addressed by some military instructors. For instance, the Peace Support Training Centre (PSTC) in Kingston, Ontario, has regularly included the subject of child soldiers in their training programs since 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Megan M. Thompson, "Moral Injury in Military Operations: A Review of the Literature and Key Considerations for the Canadian Armed Forces," *Defence Research and Development Canada*, Scientific Report DRDC-RDDC-2015-R029 (March 2015): 1-36.

<sup>6</sup> Most of the information used in this section was provided by LCol Suzanne M. Bailey, SSO Social Work & Mental Health Training, CAF Health Services Group Headquarters, Email Friday, March 11, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> See James Cudmore, "Military to hire gender specialists for operational advice overseas," *CBC News*, October 30, 2015, accessed July 29, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/military-to-hire-gender-specialists-for-operational-advice-overseas-1.3297680>. Also, the CAF regularly conducts training on vulnerable populations. See Canada, Department of National Defence, "Women in the Canadian Armed Forces," *News*



considered in relation to other intersecting issues – like why and how they are recruited, as well as issues of sexual and gender-based violence – is indicative of how pervasive these problems are. It is also important to bear in mind that these issues, their implications, associated legal concerns and the actions required to respond to them are clearly linked to well-established international conventions, like United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, the Law of Armed Conflict at the Operational and Tactical Levels, and the Geneva Conventions. Military responses to child soldiers, and to vulnerable populations in general, must be reflective of these laws and agreements. Following from this, JDN 2017-01 suggests that future doctrinal guidance to the CAF regarding the issue of child soldiers is likely to be incorporated into “more all-encompassing doctrine related to the overarching considerations related to vulnerable populations”.<sup>8</sup>

The need for training and education on the topic of child soldiers also figures prominently in the doctrine note. In particular, including this subject in professional military education (PME), during pre-deployment training, and in relevant mental health programs is key. In addition, while recognizing the importance of training across the deployment cycle, the doctrine note acknowledges that training on child soldiers should not solely be limited to deploying troops. Consideration of issues regarding child soldiers should be included “in all force generation activities to adequately prepare CAF personnel both militarily and mentally”.<sup>9</sup> Resultantly, the doctrine note recommends that all CAF personnel be trained and educated regarding the potential presence of children during armed conflict.<sup>10</sup>

The doctrine note also suggests that encounters with child soldiers during operations can be particularly traumatic, especially if someone is injured or killed.<sup>11</sup> Through educating deploying CAF personnel on issues related to child soldiering, plus the possibility that they may need to engage child combatants with force, the doctrine note suggests that proper preparation may help mitigate the potential psychological impacts these encounters may have on CAF personnel.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, ensuring the CAF’s readiness to undertake missions that may involve encountering child soldiers is critical for attaining operational success. Readiness stems from the provision of adequate training and education on the topic of child soldiers at all levels of command, during PME and at each stage of the deployment cycle. Coupled with appropriate mental health initiatives, this training will also assist in minimizing the psychological impacts that encounters with child soldiers may create for deployed personnel.

Altogether, JDN 2017-01 serves as a significant starting point to address this knowledge and capability gap in the Canadian military. However, doctrine is only truly useful upon implementation. Given that, it is necessary to operationalize JDN 2017-01 across the CAF. The following recommendations are intended to help inform this process.

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*Product*, March 6, 2014, accessed July 26, 2017, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/news/article.page?doc=women-in-the-canadian-armed-forces/hie8w7rm>.

<sup>8</sup> Canada, Department of National Defence, *Canadian Forces Joint Doctrine Note 2017-01, Child Soldiers*, 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Canada, Department of National Defence, *Canadian Forces Joint Doctrine Note 2017-01, Child Soldiers*, 1-6; Coombs, “Are They Children? Or Are They Soldiers?” 5; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Child Soldiers as the Opposing Force* (January 2011), 2-4.

<sup>12</sup> Canada, Department of National Defence, *Canadian Forces Joint Doctrine Note 2017-01, Child Soldiers*, 1-6, 2-12.



- 1) *Issues concerning child soldiers should be integrated into the pre-deployment training instructions provided by CJOC, as well as the IBTS for both the army and navy.*

Information on the topic should be consistently integrated into the pre-deployment training instructions provided by CJOC for force generation from the army, navy, and air force. The subject of child soldiers should also be included in the IBTS for both land and naval operations. Information that should be incorporated into these directives could include how and why children become engaged in armed groups, child soldiers as a vulnerable population, recognizing that child soldiers can pose a threat to professional forces, detaining child soldiers and understanding the six grave violations against children as outlined by the United Nations Security Council.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the IBTS for naval operations should discuss subjects related to child pirates. These topics are highly intersectional and could be built in to pre-existing training segments like conducting searches and detaining personnel, conducting checkpoints, conducting observation posts, principles of the use of force and applying rules of engagement. Ultimately, mastery of service-specific IBTS and pre-deployment training materials are critical to ensure that the CAF maintains standard readiness. These materials should incorporate issues concerning child soldiers.

- 2) *Topics on child soldiers should be taught across all levels of professional development, starting with basic training courses.*

The doctrine note recognizes the importance of training and educating CAF personnel during force generation activities in order to adequately prepare soldiers both militarily and mentally for potential encounters with child soldiers. Because basic training courses provide Canadian military members with the core skills and common military knowledge that are required to succeed in military environments, a general awareness of issues concerning child soldiers should be incorporated into training materials. Not only will this ensure a base knowledge of child soldiering across the CAF, but it will also help alleviate pressures placed on pre-deployment courses to cover all aspects of child soldiering.

- 3) *Post-deployment screening processes should consider issues regarding child soldiers and moral injuries.*

To ensure that individuals with deployment-related health problems receive care more rapidly, the EPDS process should screen for interactions with child soldiers, as well as moral injuries. In particular, the patient health questionnaire should include questions concerning child soldiers, war-affected children, feelings connected to emotions that express moral transgressions (like fear, horror, guilt, shame, or helplessness), and if the

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<sup>13</sup> See United Nations, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, “The Six Grave Violations,” accessed May 15, 2018, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/>.



soldier was the perpetrator, victim or witness of any acts that may violate fundamental moral values.

4) *The Royal Military College of Canada (RMC) should offer undergraduate courses on the topic of child soldiers.*

As of the summer of 2018, a directed reading course on child soldiers will be provided to graduate students at RMC through the War Studies programme. While this is a step in the right direction, graduate students comprise only a small segment of the RMC population. Therefore, providing one course that is only accessible to graduate students does not adequately address concerns outlined in JDN 2017-01 regarding the development of education that is reflective of issues concerning child soldiers. Accordingly, RMC, in particular, should offer in-house and distance learning courses on the topic of child soldiers at the undergraduate level in order to adequately educate and train the future leaders of the Canadian military on this topic.

Ultimately, conflict has changed, and therefore the manner in which the CAF prepares for and conducts operations must also change. Children are integral components of warring parties, including government forces, rebel groups and terrorist organizations. It is therefore incumbent that Canadian soldiers are provided the appropriate competencies to better manage this aspect of conflict and help reduce the exploitation of children in regions afflicted by violence. This includes training and education related to children's protection, rights and welfare, as well as understanding how child soldiers may present a threat to Canadian military personnel. While these needs were recognized in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* and through the creation of JDN 2017-01, the manner in which the CAF will address these needs has yet to be defined. Given that Canadian soldiers are likely to deploy to regions where child soldiers are prevalent, including some areas in Africa or the Middle East, ensuring that CAF personnel are well-prepared to respond appropriately to potential interactions with child soldiers remains a critical consideration.



## ► About the Author

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**Lindsay Coombs** is a PhD student in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University and a Graduate Research Fellow at the Centre for International and Defence Policy. Lindsay completed a Master of Arts in Political Studies, also from Queen's University, where she specialized in International Relations. Her Master's thesis focused on innovation in Canadian military doctrine, training, and education on the topic of child soldiers. Lindsay also holds a Bachelor with Honours in Conflict Studies and Human Rights from the University of Ottawa, where she graduated with distinction. Her research interests include the Canadian Armed Forces, child soldiers, women in security and defence, and defence policy. In addition to her studies, Lindsay is the National Chapter Coordinator for Women in International Security (WIIS) Canada, a network dedicated to actively advancing women's leadership in international peace and security. In this role, she coordinates the activities of university and community Chapters across the nation. Lindsay is also the President and Founder of WIIS at Queen's University.



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