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Leisure Time as a Space for Building Family Bonds in Military Families: An Analysis within the Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning

Abstract. Military families face unique challenges that can impact their leisure activities. This study aimed to assess the types and levels of engagement, and the degree of satisfaction with leisure in military families in Lubuskie Province. The Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning (CBM) was used to explore the relationship between core and balance activities and the level of satisfaction with family leisure involvement. Three standardized questionnaires were used: the Family Leisure Activity Profile (FLAP), the Family Leisure Satisfaction Scale (FLSS), and the Satisfaction with Family Life (SWFL). The sample consisted of 26 Polish families (52 individuals). Core activities were found to be more popular, but preferences and engagement patterns varied between adults and children. Parents tended to be more involved in core activities, while children preferred balance activities. Correlations between participation and satisfaction varied across age groups, highlighting different leisure needs and experiences within families. Findings point to the importance of tailoring leisure programs to the specific needs of both adults and children with a view to enhancing family functioning.

Keywords: family leisure, military families, core and balance model, Polish families

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1. Introduction

The family constitutes the fundamental environment of human life. Its character, structure, and roles associated with it depend on a range of factors, including the country of residence, the cultural context, religious affiliation, and dynamic

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social transformations. What remains constant, however, are the processes of mutual interaction and interdependence. From a scholarly perspective, this fact makes the family an almost inexhaustible subject of research. Studies of military families in Western societies have consistently documented the unique challenges posed by military service, including frequent relocations, parental deployments, and disruptions to daily routines, all of which affect family functioning and child outcomes. Studies from the United Kingdom indicate that family functioning fluctuates across the deployment cycle, with families experiencing active deployment or reintegration facing elevated stress and reduced cohesion (Pye & Simpson, 2017; Caddick & Fossey, 2023). Similarly, according to Canadian research, children in military families may experience emotional and behavioral difficulties related to parental absence and the logistical demands of military life (Williams et al., 2023). Broader European comparative research echoes these findings, demonstrating that across multiple contexts, including Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK, military families navigate complex adaptive processes to maintain cohesion and support child development in the face of military demands (Moelker et al., 2015).

Within this broad and complex framework of familial interaction and interdependence, leisure emerges as a particularly salient domain through which family relationships are enacted, negotiated, and reinforced. Family leisure is usually defined as shared discretionary time that promotes cohesion, communication, and mutual satisfaction among family members (Kelly, 1999; Agate et al., 2009). Recent theoretical developments identify distinct typologies of family leisure, highlight structural and interpersonal barriers, and document multidimensional benefits (e.g. Álvarez Muñoz & Hernández Prados, 2023).

Against this conceptual backdrop, family leisure must also be situated within contemporary social conditions that increasingly constrain shared time and reorient leisure practices toward individualized forms of self-realization. Contemporary living standards and the numerous challenges associated with them, including the shrinking budgets of free time and the loosening of interpersonal relationships, pose a serious threat to the functioning of families. Recent years have seen the emergence of a discernible trend in the public sphere that emphasizes the importance of self-development through participation in various forms of leisure activities (e.g. Stebbins, 2017; Synowiec-Pilat et al., 2022). Although this tendency undeniably generates broadly understood benefits for individuals' psychological and physical well-being, it also has certain drawbacks. Such pursuits often position the individual at the center, thereby diminishing the significance of social relationships and bonds (e.g., Hicks et al., 2025; Pluta, 2024; Williamson et al., 2018). A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that participation in family

leisure strengthens emotional bonds, supports conflict-management processes, and enhances overall family functioning (Townsend et al., 2017).

Family leisure plays a significant role in fostering emotional connections, communication, and cohesion among family members. Within military families, however, leisure is often constrained by the unique challenges of military service, including deployments, frequent relocations, irregular work schedules, and the physical, psychological, and moral injuries sustained by parents, all of which significantly shape opportunities for shared family time (Briggs et al., 2019). For military families, the restorative potential of family leisure to support or undermine individual and family well-being may be amplified because of the additional stressors of military life. Some family leisure experiences may support family cohesion and reintegration following family member separation (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; DeVoe et al., 2020; Hicks et al., 2025), whereas other types of shared leisure activities or environments may be more likely to trigger memories of war and possibly exacerbate symptoms such as intrusive recollections, hyperarousal, emotional dysregulation, and sleep disturbances, as well as family-related difficulties including emotional withdrawal from family members, reduced parental availability, heightened family conflict, and disruptions in family roles and routines. (Melton et al., 2018; Kritikos et al., 2019). Research further indicates that barriers such as time scarcity, competing commitments, and limited access to resources shape both the quantity and quality of family leisure (Álvarez Muñoz & Hernández Prados, 2023; Hicks et al., 2025). Barriers to family leisure can also stem from the competing demands of family and military life, as military families often live at the intersection of two “greedy institutions”. According to Segal (1986; see also Segal, 2024), the term refers to the military and family, both of which place competing demands on service members and vie for their time, commitment and energy.

This article uses the theoretical framework of CBM to explore how leisure time functions as a space for building and maintaining family bonds in military families.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural and Organizational Context in Poland

Polish military families inhabit a distinctive cultural and institutional environment shaped by the historical legacy of national defense, collectivist social norms, and the enduring influence of Catholic ethical traditions. Military service in Poland has long been perceived not merely as a form of employment but as a vocation

grounded in patriotism and moral duty, a perspective that deeply intertwines family identity with military identity (Baranowska, 2013, 2014; Krzyżewski, 2014). As a result, emotional dynamics surrounding separation and reunion often carry symbolic weight, reflecting intergenerational expectations of sacrifice and loyalty (Basińska, 2004; Polcyn-Radomska, 2014; Krzemińska-Cieśla, 2022). Unlike volunteer-based military systems, such as those in the United States or the United Kingdom, Polish military families frequently reside within socially cohesive, semi-closed institutional communities in which shared norms and traditions strengthen group identity (Basińska, 2004; Gurba, 2021; Krzemińska-Cieśla, 2022). Within these settings, leisure often assumes a ritualized character, functioning as a means of reaffirming unity, restoring normalcy, and sustaining meaning amid institutional demands (Melton et al., 2018; McWhorter et al., 2015; Hodge et al., 2018). This duality of discipline and intimacy shapes how the Core and Balance Model manifests in the Polish military context: core activities, which tend to be simple, repetitive, and home-centered, gain symbolic significance as expressions of care, security, and familial loyalty, whereas balance activities, such as tourism or recreational outings, serve as opportunities for renewal, relational renegotiation, and personal agency within a highly structured system (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, 2003; Townsend et al., 2017; Melton et al., 2018).

2.2. Core and Balance Model

Research indicates that active military service, even when undertaken by a single family member, contributes to the emergence of a distinctive educational and developmental environment in which all family members are exposed to substantial logistical and emotional burdens, including elevated psychosocial risk for children and disruptions in family communication and functioning (Opie et al., 2024; Briggs et al., 2019; Cunitz et al., 2019). The military household operates as a unique ecological system shaped by deployment cycles, institutional demands, and the psychological climate generated by prolonged separations and reintegration (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Gewirtz, 2018). Research consistently demonstrates that the stresses of military life extend beyond the service member, affecting spouses and children through increased role strain, emotional overload, and disruptions to daily routines (Cozza et al., 2013; Lester & Flake, 2013; Paley et al., 2013; Briggs et al., 2019; Krzemińska-Cieśla, 2022; Opie et al., 2024). Within this context, shared participation in leisure activities plays a particularly significant function of fostering and strengthening family bonds, promoting integration, and enhancing the sense of security. An analysis of leisure practices may thus facilitate a deeper understanding of the internal mechanisms governing individual interactions and sup-

port the development of preventive programs aimed at assisting military families (McWhorter et al., 2015; Hicks et al., 2025; Bowles, 2015).

The Core and Balance Model (CBM) of family leisure functioning is a widely used framework for examining and interpreting family leisure behaviors. Developed in the United States (Poff et al., 2010; Townsend et al., 2017; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003), and thoroughly discussed in the scholarly literature, it has seen comparatively limited application in Poland. The CBM provides a conceptual structure that enables researchers to formulate and evaluate hypotheses concerning family leisure across various family configurations and cultural contexts. In recent years, the model has been applied in several Polish studies (e.g., Margasiński, 2015; Pluta, 2024; Pluta et al., 2024; Szcześniak & Tułeczka, 2020). The CBM identifies two types of family leisure, core and balance, which are used to meet the needs of stability and change, and ultimately promote family functioning and life satisfaction (e.g., Townsend et al., 2017). According to this framework, the core and balance activities satisfy families' needs for both stability and novelty, thereby enhancing overall functioning and life satisfaction (Figure 1).

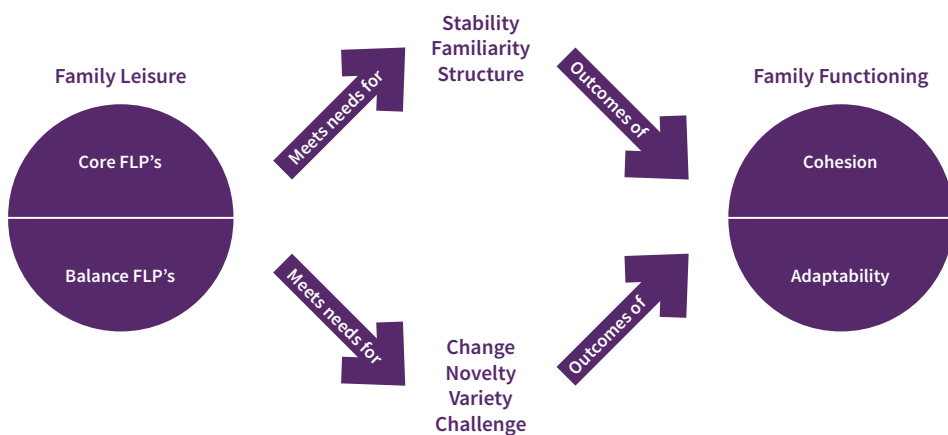


Figure 1. Core and Balance Model
Source: Zabriskie & McCormick (2001)

The CBM, originally proposed by Zabriskie and colleagues (2001), offers a meaningful analytical perspective for understanding the dynamics of family leisure within the Polish sociocultural setting (Pluta et al., 2024). The application of the CBM within military family research is justified by findings showing that stability-oriented core activities buffer disruptions and sustain cohesion (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, 2003; Townsend et al., 2017), whereas novelty-oriented balance activities promote adaptive functioning, support reintegration, and facilitate

role rene-gotiation in military households (Melton et al., 2018; McWhorter et al., 2015; Hicks et al., 2025; Bowles, 2015). Much of Polish research on family leisure and on military families has developed without a systematic integration of CBM concepts into the study of Polish military households.

Polish studies in this area consistently emphasize that military service introduces unique structural and emotional challenges that differentiate military families from civilian ones. Early conceptual contributions highlighted the ways in which institutional military norms — discipline, hierarchy, mobility, and exposure to risk — shape family roles and everyday functioning. In her study soldiers stationed in extreme conditions, Basińska (2004), demonstrated that military families often face significant emotional and organizational burdens resulting from prolonged absence, uncertainty, and the need to continually reestablish routines during re-integration. Her analysis underscored the centrality of the family as a stabilizing “home base” within the instability inherent in military service.

Subsequent studies have expanded the understanding of how service abroad affects marital and parental relationships. Baranowska (2013, 2014) showed that foreign missions intensify communication difficulties, heighten emotional strain in spouses, and introduce substantial challenges to family cohesion. Her research reveals the complex interplay between professional obligations and private life, often described by authors as a collision between “two worlds” — the world of military order and the world of family intimacy. Similar findings appear in psychological research into the consequences of military missions for service members themselves and for their families. Karakiewicz et al. (2018) demonstrated that combat exposure and deployment-related stress contribute not only to mental health issues among soldiers but also to disruptions in family functioning following their return.

Another important strand of Polish research investigates the developmental consequences of parental deployment for children. Polcyn-Radomska (2014) identified emotional and behavioral difficulties emerging in children during prolonged parental absence, including heightened anxiety, insecurity, and disturbances in daily functioning. More recent studies emphasize the possibility of secondary traumatization in spouses and children, noting that the stress experienced by the service member often transfers indirectly into their family system (Krzemińska-Cieśla, 2022). These findings highlight the need to approach military families from a systemic perspective that recognizes re-ciprocal influences among family members.

Beyond the psychological dimension, Polish pedagogical research explores military families as distinctive educational environments. Broader sociological and historical analyses, such as those by Krzyżewski (2014), indicate that the challenges faced by military families are not a contemporary phenomenon but reflect long-standing cultural and institutional characteristics of military life in Poland.

2.3. Hypothesis Development

The CBM distinguishes between core leisure activities, which provide stability and intimacy, and balance leisure activities, which promote adaptability and flexibility. Drawing on a review of the literature and selected empirical studies, the following study demonstrates how these two dimensions manifest in the everyday lives of Polish military families and how they contribute to family resilience, cohesion, and overall well-being. The analysis highlights both the strength and the limitations of the CBM in explaining leisure behaviors in the specific socio-cultural and institutional context of the Polish Armed Forces. The study contributes to the broader discussion on adapting Western family leisure models to different national and occupational contexts.

The following hypotheses were put forward in the study:

H1: Parents in military families report higher involvement in core activities than their children.

In military families, the burden of sustaining stability in the face of deployment-related stress, role disruptions, and repeated reintegration often falls on the non-deployed parent, who relies on predictable core activities to re-establish normalcy and emotional security (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Gewirtz, 2018; Lester & Flake, 2013; Williams, et al. 2023). Consequently, parents' subjective involvement in core leisure tends to exceed that of their children, who may experience routine activities as less central to their relational needs or identity development (Williamson et al., 2018). These findings support the expectation that parents in military families are likely to report higher involvement in core activities than their children.

H2: Among military families, balance activities correlate more strongly with family life satisfaction among children than among parents.

Studies grounded in the CBM indicate that balance activities contribute to adaptability, communication, and joint problem-solving, outcomes that younger family members often perceive as especially rewarding and meaningful (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001; Townsend et al., 2017). Empirical work shows that adolescents derive heightened satisfaction from leisure contexts that promote novelty, competence, and relational reengagement factors that may be amplified in military families where cycles of separation and reunion disrupt relational continuity (Huebner et al., 2007; Paley et al., 2013). Research on military recreation programs further demonstrates that structured, novel family experiences enhance children's emotional adjustment and contribute more strongly to youths' perceived family satisfaction than to adults' (McWhorter et al., 2015; Melton et al., 2018). Given these patterns, balance activities can be expected to correlate more strongly with family life satisfaction among children than among parents.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Questionnaire

The study involved Polish-language versions of all measurement instruments. The questionnaire consisted of three main sets of questions: the Family Leisure Activity Profile (FLAP) to assess family leisure engagement (Pluta et al., 2024); the Family Leisure Satisfaction Scale (FLSS), integrated within the FLAP framework (Pluta et al., 2026); and the Satisfaction with Family Life (SWFL) (Przybyła-Basista et al., 2021). These specific questions were accompanied by a set of sociodemographic items.

The Polish FLAP is a 14-item measure capturing the extent of participation in family leisure activities, developed on the basis of the CMB model (Hodge et al., 2018; Pluta, 2024; Pluta et al., 2024; Townsend et al., 2017; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003). Respondents indicate whether they engage in specific leisure activities with family members across 14 predefined categories. Seven categories pertain to core leisure (e.g., shared meals, indoor activities, board games), while the other seven cover balance leisure (e.g., community-based events, outdoor pursuits, water-related recreation, tourism). Core family leisure activities (common, day-to-day activities) are assumed to increase family cohesion, while balance activities (less common, away from home) are assumed to enhance family adaptability. Each item comprises three components: a binary indicator of participation (yes/no), a frequency indicator (daily, weekly, monthly, annually), and a duration indicator (less than one hour, one to three hours, three to six hours, or three weeks or more). Composite indices of family leisure involvement (for the caregiver, the child, and the family as a unit) are obtained by summing individual scores across the core and balance domains.

Recent methodological developments in the assessment of family leisure involvement have led to the proposal of an alternative scaling procedure for FLAP, addressing notable limitations in the traditional scoring approach (Melton & Ellis, 2019). The conventional approach to FLAP scores involves multiplying ordinal-level indicators of frequency and duration, a practice that violates the principles of statistical validity by applying algebraic operations to non-interval data. This procedure can distort score distributions, obscure true differences between respondents, and disrupt rank ordering, ultimately weakening the precision and validity of empirical findings. The alternative procedure re-structures FLAP scoring by converting participants' reports of frequency and duration into ratio-level values, expressed in natural units of time. Frequency responses are translated into estimated days of participation per year (e.g., daily = 365, weekly = 52, monthly = 12, annually = 1),

while duration responses are assigned corresponding hourly values derived directly from reported time intervals. For each activity category, these ratio-level indicators — participation (0/1), annualized frequency, and typical duration in hours — are multiplied to produce an estimate of annual hours devoted to that activity. Summed across categories, these values yield interpretable prevalence scores representing total time involvement within core and balance domains or other theoretically relevant groupings (Table 1).

Table 1. Ratio-scaled scoring framework for FLAP

Component	Values / Codes	Operational Definition
Participation	0 = No participation 1 = Participation occurred	Indicates whether the activity took place in the past 12 months.
Frequency (Days/Year)	Daily = 365 Weekly = 52 Monthly = 12 Annually = 1	Converted to annualized days of activity involvement.
Duration (Hours)	<1 h = 1 1–2 h = 2 2–3 h = 3 ... 7 days = 168 14 days = 336 ≥3 weeks = 504	Converted to hours based on reported duration categories.
Prevalence Score	Participation × Frequency × Duration	Represents annual hours per activity; may be summed across domains.

Source: Based on Melton & Ellis (2019)

This approach preserves the quantitative meaning of participants’ responses, enhances measurement precision, and yields substantially greater variance than the traditional method. The increased fidelity of the scoring process supports more reliable detection of associations between family leisure patterns and indicators of family functioning, well-being, and other psychosocial constructs. Moreover, the ratio-scaled scores are adaptable to alternative temporal frames and can serve as meaningful indices of activity involvement in diverse research contexts. Despite potential recall bias inherent in self-report measures, the alternative scaling procedure offers a more defensible and interpretable metric of family leisure engagement, ensuring that rank ordering and derived estimates better reflect actual differences in reported behavior.

The Polish adaptation has demonstrated sound psychometric quality, with intraclass correlations of 0.65 for core activities and 0.70 for balance activities in Model 1, and values ranging from 0.56 (community location) to 0.68 (beyond community location) in Model 2 (Pluta et al., 2024).

Embedded within the FLAP, the FLSS assesses the level of satisfaction with family leisure based on the CBM framework. Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Satisfaction with core leisure is derived from Items 1–7, and satisfaction with balance leisure from Items 8–14, with an overall satisfaction index computed as the sum of both domains. The Polish version displays robust psychometric properties, including high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92-.93$) and strong reliability (ICC(2k) = $.91-.94$) (Pluta et al., 2026).

SWFL contains five items evaluating global perceptions of family life, scored on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The total score ranges from 5 to 35 and is created by summing all item responses. Normative and descriptive data were collected from heterogeneous family samples representing multiple family perspectives, including those of parents and adolescents aged 11–15. The Polish version has demonstrated solid psychometric performance, with excellent test–retest reliability and high internal consistency in the full sample ($\alpha = .92$; $\omega = .92$), as well as among women ($\alpha = .93$; $\omega = .93$) and men ($\alpha = .89$; $\omega = .90$) (Przybyła-Basista, 2021).

The questionnaire also included 5 items capturing essential background characteristics of respondents: age, sex, marital status, educational attainment, and family type (biological, foster, or adoptive).

Although the following analysis is based on a sample of just 52 respondents, which may seem rather modest in general population research, such sample size could still be deemed sufficient for the highly specific context of military families, where recruitment is constrained by frequent relocations, operational tempo, and documented reluctance to engage with research due to privacy concerns and distrust of external investigators (Krzemińska-Cieśla, 2022). Small sample sizes are a common challenge in research involving military populations, where access to participants is inherently limited. Such constraints diminish statistical power and narrow the scope for detecting nuanced relationships within the data. For this reason, the following exploratory analysis seeks to identify emerging patterns rather than evaluate broadly generalizable hypotheses. In contexts where the research population is either difficult to reach or numerically small, qualitative approaches may provide greater analytical richness, enabling the examination of complex experiences and contextual dynamics that can-not be reliably captured through quantitative measures under restrictive sampling conditions.

3.2. Research Procedure

The empirical data for this study were collected from a sample of Polish military families, an inherently unique and small population, which is difficult to access owing to organizational, geographic, and security-related constraints. Such populations are commonly studied through small-sample or hard-to-reach population methodologies, where analytical depth and contextual fidelity are prioritized over broad generalizability. The selection of participants followed a purposive, community-based sampling strategy. Recruitment was carried out in coordination with local military structures and institutions providing support to service members' families. Access to respondents was facilitated primarily through contacts with family support officers, local military organizations, and community support networks engaged in activities for the military population. Participating households had to have at least one member serving on active duty in units stationed within Lubuskie Province. Households that did not meet this requirement, as well as those unable or unwilling to provide informed consent, were excluded from the survey. Each family submitted two completed questionnaires, as recommended by Zabriskie and McCormick (2003): one from a parent and one from a child between the ages of 11 and 16. Another eligibility criterion was the parent's and the child's ability to give informed consent to participate in the study, with either of them having the right to make this decision independently and with full knowledge of the implications of participation.

3.3. Participants

This analysis is based on empirical data collected in a survey involving 26 military families (52 respondents), which was conducted between November 2024 and January 2025. The majority of these military reside in Lubuskie Province, a region located in western Poland and of notable strategic significance. Its western border is part of the national border, which has historically shaped and continues to influence the deployment and organization of Polish military units in the area.

Male respondents accounted for 73.1% of the sample, and the largest age category comprised adults aged 41–50 (42.3%). All parents assessed their family's material conditions as either very good or good (100%). Secondary education was the most frequently reported level of education (61.5%), and the majority of adult respondents served on active military duty (69.3%). Over half of the adults declared being in a formal partnership (57.9%), and all were members of biological families (100%). Families with two children formed the largest subgroup (38.5%).

The study also included 26 children, with a balanced sex distribution. Adolescents born between 2010 and 2013 represented the largest age cohort (38.5%). Their

current material conditions were most commonly evaluated as very good (69.2%). First-born children were the most numerous group (57.7%).

Overall, the analysis of the parental sample demonstrates that the majority of adults lived in formal partnerships and constituted biological families characterized by very good living conditions. Respondents were predominantly individuals with secondary education who were actively serving in the military. Female participants represented all marital status categories, did not include retirees or pensioners. The child sample was dominated by first-born children, most of whom described their material situation as very good.

3.4. Statistical Analysis

The statistical analyses were conducted using the R environment (version 4.0.4;) and the Statistica software package (version 13.3;). The normality of the data was verified using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The dataset was organized into analytical files: parent responses, child responses, and a combined family-level dataset. Because the data originated from parent-child dyads, a mixed-effects modeling approach was employed to account for variance attributable both to individuals and to the family unit. Prior to analysis, all datasets underwent data screening procedures, during which questionnaires containing missing items or implausible values were removed.

Although the study is based on a relatively small sample ($n = 52$), the assumptions of homogeneity and linearity were evaluated using model-based diagnostic procedures. The structure of the mixed-effects models was clarified by specifying a random intercept at the household level to account for the nesting of parent-child dyads within families. All predictors were treated as fixed effects to ensure that the paired data were modeled in a statistically coherent manner.

The computational tools included three R packages: the lme4 R package for estimating the models, the lmerTest package for calculating p-values for fixed effects, and the performance package offering diagnostic procedures to measure model performance. The significance threshold was set at $\alpha = .05$, and effect sizes are reported as fixed-effect estimates accompanied by 95% confidence intervals, permitting interpretation of the magnitude and precision of effects despite the limited sample size.

3.5. Ethical Consideration

The university's bioethics committee determined that the project did not require formal ethical approval. The research was conducted entirely online. For this pur-

pose, a free Google form was used, which included the FLAP, FLSS and SWFL questionnaires, as well as demographic questions. The form consisted of two sections: the first was addressed to the child and the second to the parent. An additional question relating to employment in the military was included in each part. The set of questionnaires (one for parents and one for children) was sent to each family. Participating parents and children were asked to complete and return the questionnaires independently within two weeks.

4. Results

4.1. Parents' and Children's Participation in Family Leisure Activities

Among parents, the highest level of engagement in core activities was observed for shared household activities (e.g., listening to music, watching films, reading; $M = 240.3$, $SD = 347.9$). The least frequent core activity was supporting family members as spectators or assistants during events ($M = 19.3$, $SD = 18.1$). In the case of balance activities, parents most commonly participated in tourism-related activities ($M = 189.5$, $SD = 122.2$), whereas other local activities, such as museum visits or fairs, received the lowest scores ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 10.3$). Children reported the highest involvement in shared indoor hobbies (e.g., cooking, drawing, crafts; $M = 154.3$, $SD = 418$) and, similarly to parents, the lowest involvement in supporting family members during events ($M = 10.6$, $SD = 26.3$). As in the parental sample, tourism activities were the most frequent balance category for children ($M = 163$, $SD = 136$), whereas extreme activities (e.g., climbing, rafting) were least common ($M = 0.9$, $SD = 4.7$).

Notably, the activities rated highest in frequency by both groups were also characterized by the largest standard deviations, which indicates substantial variability in participation patterns. The dispersion in the case of balance activities was generally more homogeneous, with the exception of outdoor and water-based activities, which were more variable in both groups.

Table 2 summarizes the aggregated FLAP indicators for both samples. Parents reported higher overall involvement in both core and balance activities (core participation $M = 2599.75$; balance participation $M = 1325$) compared to children (core $M = 2051.63$; balance $M = 1247.5$). Parents also reported higher satisfaction levels for both activity types. Variability was greater among children's participation scores, indicating more differentiated activity patterns across the younger respondents.

Table 2. Summary FLAP scores (M±SD) (parents vs. children)

Category	Parents		Children	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Core participation	2599.75	191.02	2051.63	190.55
Core satisfaction	105.25	1.30	98.88	1.27
Balance participation	1325.00	118.95	1247.5	158.74
Balance satisfaction	99.63	1.25	80.12	1.24
Total participation	1962.38	154.99	1649.57	174.64
Total satisfaction	84.15	1.28	64.50	1.26

SD — standard deviation

Source: Author's own research

Independent-samples comparisons indicated statistically significant differences between parents and children across all participation and satisfaction measures ($p < .05$), with parents reporting higher levels than children. Among parents, men reported substantially higher involvement in both core ($M = 1447.38$) and balance ($M = 854.13$) activities compared to women. Men also expressed higher satisfaction with both types of activities. However, both sexes engaged more frequently in core than in balance leisure. Among children, boys exhibited higher levels of participation in both core ($M = 1077.25$) and balance ($M = 866.38$) activities, as well as slightly higher satisfaction levels. Boys' responses displayed greater variability, suggesting more diverse patterns of engagement than among girls.

4.2. Associations between Family Leisure Involvement and Satisfaction

Spearman correlations between family leisure involvement and satisfaction (FLSS) for parents and children are presented in Table 3. Statistically significant correlations ($p < .05$) were observed primarily for moderate to strong associations, particularly between balance leisure activities and satisfaction, and between core leisure satisfaction and overall life satisfaction. Weak correlations did not reach statistical significance. In the parents' group, the strongest positive associations in the case of core activities were observed for shared indoor games ($r = 0.338$), outdoor home-based activities ($r = 0.327$), shared sports play ($r = 0.515$), and shared hobbies ($r = 0.737$). Weak correlations were identified for shared meals and participation in religious events. With regard to balance activities, all correlations were positive. The strongest association was found for attending events as spectators ($r = 0.494$), followed by sports participation and water activities. The weakest though still positive correlation was observed for tourism activities produced ($r = 0.063$). As for core activities reported by children, all correlations were positive except for participation in religious ceremonies, which

were negatively correlated with satisfaction ($r = -0.285$). The strongest correlations were observed for shared indoor games ($r = 0.342$) and shared sports play ($r = 0.356$). All balance activities were positively correlated with satisfaction. The strongest correlation was recorded for attending events as spectators ($r = 0.488$), which was consistent with findings in the parental sample. In the case of outdoor activities and local activities the correlation was also relatively highly positive, while that observed for water, extreme, and social activities was weaker. The correlations with SWFL provide additional insight. Both FLAP core and FLAP balance scores were modestly associated with SWFL, suggesting that overall leisure participation contributes to general family life satisfaction. More substantial associations were detected for FLSS, particularly FLSS core ($r = 0.798$), indicating that the perceived quality of core family leisure experiences is strongly related to broader satisfaction with family life.

Table 3. Correlation among study variables (parent, children)

Variable	Activity	Parent	Children
FLAP core & FLSS	shared meals	0.180	0.258
	shared household activities	0.127	0.302
	indoor games	0.338	0.342
	home-based hobbies	0.737*	0.166
	outdoor home activities	0.327	0.215
	home sports and games	0.515*	0.356
	religious celebrations	0.169	-0.285
FLAP balance & FLSS	spectator events	0.494*	0.488*
	local sports activities	0.456*	0.413*
	other local activities	0.337	0.441*
	outdoor activities	0.232	0.191
	water-based activities	0.466*	0.445*
	extreme activities	0.415*	0.186
	tourism activities	0.063	0.338
FLAP core & SWFL		0.226	0.40*
FLAP balance & SWFL		0.261	0.38
FLSS core & SWFL		0.798*	0.57*
FLSS balance & SWFL		0.358	0.41*

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed). $n = 26$ for parents and children

Source: Author's own research

To check whether parents and children reported similar overall FLAP scores, tests for the equality of variances and independent-samples t -tests were conducted. Results indicated no statistically significant differences between the two groups ($p > 0.05$). The independent-samples t -test showed that parents ($M = 1207.62$)

and children ($M = 1015.12$) did not differ significantly in their mean scores, $t(50) = 0.75$, $p = 0.46$ (two-tailed). Variances were comparable, suggesting that the observed differences in means likely reflect normal sampling variation. These findings support the conclusion that parents and children display similar overall levels of involvement in family leisure activities.

4.3. Satisfaction with Family Life

Descriptive statistics for parental and children SWFL scores are presented in Table 4. Mean responses ranged from 5.69 to 6.62, indicating generally high satisfaction with family life. Standard deviations were low across all items, demonstrating strong consistency among respondents. The most divergent responses were noted for Item 5 (“If I could live my family life again, I would change almost nothing”), whereas Items 6 and 7 revealed minimal variability, highlighting a uniformly high level of agreement. Skewness values were predominantly negative, suggesting a clustering of responses at the upper end of the scale. Children’s SWFL scores were characterized by greater variability than those of parents, with means ranging from 4.85 to 5.85. The broadest spread of responses was again observed for Item 5, mirroring parental patterns. Most items showed moderate dispersion, and skewness values were largely negative, indicating a tendency toward higher satisfaction ratings. Only one item exhibited right skewness, suggesting a concentration of responses below the mean for that statement.

Table 4. SWFL descriptive statistics (parents and children)

Item	Parents Mean	Parents SD	Parents Kurtosis	Parents Skewness	Children Mean	Children SD	Children Kurtosis	Children Skewness
1. In most ways my family life is close to ideal.	5.73	0.67	0.78	-0.51	5.23	1.24	0.77	-0.88
2. The conditions of my family life are excellent	6.08	0.69	-0.72	-0.1	5.77	0.76	-0.15	-0.15
3. I am satisfied with my family life	6.62	0.64	1.19	-1.48	5.85	0.73	0.47	-0.41
4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in my family life	5.88	0.86	0.04	-0.57	5.19	0.98	-1.12	0.14
5. If I could live my family life over, I would change almost nothing	5.69	1.29	0.1	-0.95	4.85	1.49	-0.83	-0.35

Source: Author's own research

5. Discussion

This study examined family leisure involvement among Polish military families through the lens of the Core and Balance Model, with the application of an alternative ratio-scaled scoring procedure for the FLAP to enhance measurement precision. Research on family leisure highlights its dual role as a mechanism of stability and adaptation, a framework formalized in the Core and Balance Model. Core leisure activities, which are familiar, predictable, and routinely practiced, serve to reinforce cohesion, continuity, and emotional security within the family. By contrast, balance leisure activities introduce novelty, challenge, and variation, prompting families to adapt, develop new skills, and navigate unfamiliar situations together. Within Polish military families, these processes are particularly salient. Frequent relocations, separations due to deployments, and the structural rigidity of military life impose significant logistical and emotional demands, making core routines an essential stabilizing force, while balance activities provide opportunities for adaptability and relational growth. Empirical evidence from Polish studies supports this pattern: families rely on structured daily routines to buffer stress and maintain predictability (Krzemińska-Cieśla, 2022), while involvement in novel or adaptive leisure experiences fosters flexibility and strengthens family bonds (Chabielski & Chabielski, 2025). Thus, leisure participation in these families functions simultaneously as a source of stability and a facilitator of adaptation, illustrating how the core and balance model operates in a context shaped by the unique demands of military life.

As described in the previous section, parents reported higher involvement in core activities than children, while children indicated greater engagement in balance activities. These results align with previous CBM research suggesting that family members perceive leisure patterns differently depending on their roles, responsibilities, and developmental stage (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001; Agate et al., 2009). Similar results were also obtained by Pluta (2024). Parents' comparatively greater emphasis on routine, home-based leisure is consistent with findings from North American and European military samples indicating that structured family routines often serve as stabilizing mechanisms during periods of heightened operational tempo or deployment cycles. Children's greater involvement in balance activities is also consistent with a study by Hodge et al. (2018), who found that adolescents in military families tend to gravitate toward activities that provide novelty, stimulation, and opportunities for peer connection — experiences that may help counterbalance the unpredictability associated with parental service obligations.

The observed associations between leisure involvement, leisure satisfaction, and satisfaction with family life further situate the present findings within a broader lit-

erature emphasizing leisure as a pathway to resilience. Previous studies have demonstrated that shared leisure contributes to emotional bonding, effective communication, and adaptive coping in families experiencing chronic or recurrent stress (Newman et al., 2014; Melton et al., 2018). The strong links between satisfaction with family leisure and overall family life satisfaction in this study are consistent with research showing that leisure often mediates the relationship between military stressors and family well-being (Williamson et al., 2018). These results reinforce theoretical claims that core activities, owing to their predictability, support continuity and stability, whereas balance activities facilitate flexibility and relational renewal (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003). The duality of stability and change appears to be especially salient in military households, where families must repeatedly navigate transitions associated with training, relocation, and deployment.

This study also found moderate associations between leisure involvement and indicators of family life satisfaction. These associations were more pronounced when the ratio-scaled FLAP scores were used, supporting arguments that traditional ordinal FLAP scoring tends to underestimate true variability. The enhanced variation resulting from the alternative scoring procedure proves particularly valuable when assessing populations with diverse or irregular schedules, such as military families. Considering the regional context, families residing in the Lubuskie Province experience unique conditions linked to the presence of military units near the western border. The findings may therefore reflect environmental and operational stressors that influence leisure patterns, cohesion, and perceptions of family well-being.

6. Conclusions

6.1. General Conclusions

The study confirms that leisure participation serves as a means of providing stability and facilitating adaptation in Polish military families, with core routines ensuring predictability and cohesion, and balance activities fostering adaptability and relational growth in response to the unique structural and operational demands of military life (Chabielski & Chabielski, 2025; Krzemińska-Cieśla, 2022). Statistical evidence from the Polish sample shows strong correlations between family leisure and satisfaction with family life, highlighting its significance in military family resilience. Integrating family-centered recreation programs into military welfare policy can strengthen psychosocial wellbeing and family functioning. In summary,

this study offers additional evidence showing that the Core and Balance Model remains a robust theoretical tool for analyzing family functioning under stress but must be interpreted through the prism of cultural, institutional, and historical context. The empirical data about the Polish military family, rooted in traditions of solidarity and service, reveal that the equilibrium between routine and flexibility is not merely functional — it is motivated by moral considerations and has an identity-forming function. Future applications of the model should therefore integrate both psychological and sociocultural dimensions of leisure, recognizing its capacity to sustain families not only through adaptation but through meaning making.

6.2. Theoretical Implications

Military families experience recurring stressors related to service demands, separation, and reintegration, which often challenge family cohesion and wellbeing (Briggs et al., 2019; Cunitz et al., 2019; Krzemińska-Cieśla, 2022). Guided by the Core and Balance Model of Family Functioning, this article explores how shared leisure supports adaptive balance and emotional bonding in military households. Drawing on empirical data from a Polish study of military family leisure practices and integrating international findings on veteran reintegration and child wellbeing, the paper shows how leisure serves as a mechanism for restoring equilibrium, strengthening communication, and fostering resilience in families affected by military life. Results underscore the importance of structured family-based recreation in promoting family functioning and wellbeing.

The present study applies the CMB model (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001) to the specific cultural and institutional context of Polish military families. The dual structure of family leisure, comprising core and balance dimensions, was clearly observed in this population. The empirical patterns suggest that core activities, such as shared meals, household routines, and domestic recreation, may function as stabilizing practices that foster emotional continuity during periods of deployment-related absence. Similarly, balance activities, including outdoor recreation and family tourism, appear to be associated with processes of post-deployment adaptation and reintegration. These interpretations should be regarded as provisional, reflecting tendencies observed within the data rather than conclusive causal relationships. Compared with results reported in North American studies (Agate et al., 2009; Hodge et al., 2018), Polish families appear to rely more heavily on core routines as a compensatory mechanism for the structural rigidity and time constraints characteristic of military life. Polish research indicates that military families frequently face operational stressors, relocations, and organizational

demands that shape everyday family life (Chabielski & Chabielski, 2025). Under these conditions, families appear to rely more heavily on core routines as a compensatory mechanism, using stable, predictable activities to maintain cohesion and manage the structural rigidity and time constraints characteristic of military life. (Krzemińska-Cieśla, 2022). This pattern reflects broader Polish social values emphasizing family solidarity, collective resilience, and intergenerational support (Wałęga & Wałęga, 2017). The high Satisfaction with Family Life scores observed in this study ($M = 6.08\text{--}6.62$) support the interpretation of family leisure as a protective factor buffering occupational stress. These results correspond with Williamson et al. (2018), who found that children in military families demonstrate comparable wellbeing to their civilian peers when emotional communication and family routines are preserved. The strong positive correlations observed between the Family Leisure Satisfaction Scale (FLSS) and SWFL reinforce the theoretical claim that leisure mediates between structural stressors and perceived wellbeing (Agate et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2014). In the Polish sample, however, the balance component was characterized by greater variability, indicating that opportunities for flexible or novel leisure are limited by systemic factors workload, relocation frequency, and modest institutional leisure support.

6.3. Practical Implications for Military Family Support

From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore the need to incorporate family leisure into military social policy. In Poland, institutional family-support structures, such as garrison cultural centers or recreation funds, rarely prioritize leisure as a psychosocial resource. The data demonstrate that structured, low-cost family recreation could strengthen communication and facilitate reintegration during post-deployment phases. Evidence from Hicks et al. (2025) corroborates this claim: U.S. veteran families participating in family-serving recreation programs reported improved emotional responsiveness, better role negotiation, and reduced conflict. If such interventions were to be introduced in the Polish context they would have to be adapted to the hierarchical nature of the Polish Armed Forces and the collectivist orientation of their family systems. Recreation can also serve an educational purpose, as Wałęga & Wałęga (2017) argued, fostering values of cooperation, empathy, and shared responsibility. Programs integrating physical activity, outdoor education, and cultural tourism could enhance both family bonding and social cohesion within military communities. Moreover, embedding family-leisure awareness in leadership training could help normalize family engagement as an integral element of operational readiness a perspective aligned with contemporary psychosocial models of resilience in military organizations (e.g., Caddick & Smith, 2014).

6.4. Limitations and Future Research

Several methodological and contextual limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small and regionally bounded sample ($n = 52$) limits generalizability of the findings across the broader military population. The reliance on self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias, especially in hierarchical environments where admitting family strain may be stigmatized. Additionally, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference regarding temporal effects of deployment and reintegration. Future studies should employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs to track how leisure engagement evolves across service phases.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of information on whether any of the participating military personnel had recently been sent on a mission, the nature of these missions (domestic or international), and the conditions in which they took place (relatively safe or hostile). All of these factors are important for understanding the lives of military families and interpreting patterns of leisure-time behaviour. Supplementing the information on mission experiences would certainly enrich the analysis of military family members' leisure time behaviours. However, it was not possible to obtain such information in this study.

Including physiological and behavioral indicators (e.g., stress markers, social network analysis) could enrich the quantitative understanding of family resilience mechanisms. Crossnational comparisons between Polish, U.S., and Nordic military families would illuminate how institutional culture moderates the interplay of core and balance processes. Another emerging area for exploration is the role of digital leisure. Virtual communication, online gaming, and re-mote social participation during deployments could constitute new core structures of connection.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, software, supervision, validation, visualization, writing — original draft, writing — review & editing.

Declaration of interest

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Czas wolny jako przestrzeń kształtowania więzi rodzinnych w rodzinach wojskowych: analiza z wykorzystaniem modelu Core and Balance Model (CBM)

Streszczenie. Rodziny wojskowe stają przed specyficznymi wyzwaniami, które mogą wpływać na wspólne aktywności podejmowane w czasie wolnym. Celem badania była ocena typów, poziomów zaangażowania oraz stopnia zadowolenia z form spędzania czasu wolnego w rodzinach wojskowych w województwie lubuskim. W badaniu skorzystano z modelu CBM do analizy zależności między głównymi typami zajęć rekreacyjnych („core” oraz „balance”) a zadowoleniem ze wspólnego spędzania czasu wolnego. Wykorzystano trzy standaryzowane kwestionariusze: Profil aktywności rodzinnej w czasie wolnym (FLAP), Skalę satysfakcji z rodzinnego czasu wolnego (FLSS) oraz Skalę satysfakcji z rodzinnego spędzania czasu wolnego (SWFL). Próba badawcza obejmowała 26 polskich rodzin (łącznie 52 osoby). Aktywności typu „core” cieszyły się na ogół większą popularnością, jednak preferencje oraz wzorce zaangażowania różniły się pomiędzy dorosłymi a dziećmi. Rodzice częściej angażowali się w aktywności typu „core”, natomiast dzieci wykazywały większe zainteresowanie aktywnościami typu „balance”. Korelacje między uczestnictwem w aktywnościach a satysfakcją różniły się w zależności od grupy wiekowej, co wskazuje na różne potrzeby rekreacyjne w rodzinach. Wyniki wskazują na konieczność dostosowywania programów rekreacyjnych do specyficznych potrzeb zarówno dorosłych, jak i dzieci w celu wspierania zachowań wolnoczasowych w polskich rodzinach wojskowych.

Słowa kluczowe: czas wolny w rodzinie, rodziny wojskowe, core and balance model, polskie rodziny



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