



Parent-Child Separation: A Comparison of Maternally and Paternally Separated Children in Military Families

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SUMMARY: Researchers compared the psychosocial functioning of children separated from Active Duty mothers versus Active Duty fathers. Participants were surveyed regarding the psychosocial functioning of their children aged 4–18 years old and were instructed to focus on their first separation of more than 30 consecutive days. There were no significant differences in psychosocial functioning between children separated from mothers as opposed to fathers.

KEY FINDINGS

- Military children’s overall psychosocial functioning did not vary significantly based on whether or not they were separated from Active Duty mothers or Active Duty fathers.
- Children of Active Duty fathers scored lower on measures of peer relationships, handling learning demands, expression of feelings, and on indicators of physical health than children of Active Duty mothers. Children of Active Duty mothers scored lower on measures of learning style.
- The differences of children’s outcomes between separations from Active Duty mothers versus Active Duty fathers groups were no longer present once control variables were introduced.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for children who have an Active Duty parent who is deployed
- Conduct classes for Active Duty parents to provide accurate, updated information about children’s common reactions to parental separation
- Collaborate with community-based agencies that specialize in parental education to provide parenting skills training for parents with children who have delays in psychosocial development

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES

Policies could:

- Recommend children of deployed parents participate in support programs that addresses coping with parental separation
- Encourage public awareness campaigns about healthy psychosocial functioning in youth
- Support training of professionals who work with military families to better recognize and assist children who have problems with psychosocial functioning

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Researchers randomly selected 100 female and 100 male Service members from the Fort Meade, MD housing roster.
- Parents completed a paper and pencil questionnaire received via postal mail. The response rate was 52%.
- Statistical analyses were used to examine differences in reports of psychosocial functioning between the two groups of parents.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 110 Active Duty parents (50% fathers, 50% mothers) in the Army.
- Children of Active Duty fathers were relatively equal between genders (54% male) and the average age was 9.4 years (Range: 4–17 years). Children of Active Duty mothers were relatively equal between genders (51% male) and average age was 10.4 years (Range: 4–18 years).
- There were no data provided on the racial or ethnic composition of the sample.

LIMITATIONS

- This study focused on a small sample of Active Duty Army personnel and their children, and the findings may not generalize to the children of Service members in other branches of the military.
- Retrospective reporting may be inaccurate given the time between the child's first extended separation and the time of data collection.
- Participants may differ from non-participants in a way that was not measured, but affected the outcome variables (e.g., those who responded may be functioning better than those who did not respond).

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Additional research could use reports of psychosocial functioning from multiple reporters such as children, teachers, stay-at-home caregivers, and/or active duty parents.
- Psychosocial functioning could be assessed before and after parental separations using longitudinal study designs to get a better understanding of any changes that occur.
- Future studies may explore the influence of father-absence on various aspects of child functioning.

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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