The Impact of Parental Deployment on Child Social and Emotional Functioning: Perspectives of School Staff

SUMMARY: School administrators, counselors, and teachers participated in focus groups to give their perspective on the effects of parental deployment on children's social and emotional functioning at school. Results indicate that although children seemed to cope well with deployment, increased anxiety, increased responsibility, the non-deployed parent's mental health, and access to mental health services influence children's social and emotional functioning.

KEY FINDINGS:

- School staff felt that a number of aspects of deployment (e.g., uncertainty, stress, lack of support for Reserve/National Guard families) contributed to difficulties in functioning at school. Staff also commented on several children handling a first deployment seemingly well, but becoming avoidant of school as additional deployments occurred.
- More externalizing behaviors (e.g., anger and aggression) were noted for boys and more internalizing behaviors (e.g., depression) were noted for girls.
- Staff worried that many children were given too many new responsibilities during parental deployment, causing them to be overly tired, or feel a constant need to be with the at-home parent.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer appropriate support and resources to children and families experiencing deployments
- Make a continuous effort to maintain contact with military, particularly regarding critical issues (e.g., upcoming deployment, change in station), so that they may provide/refer families to additional support and resources, and continuous effort should be made to maintain contact with military, particularly regarding critical issues (e.g., upcoming deployment, change in station), so that they may provide/refer families to additional support and resources
- Provide workshops for school personnel working with military youth regarding common issues youth experience during deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage collaboration between military liaisons, schools, and programs to better provide appropriate support to military children and families
- Support programs that work with school personnel to support military youth throughout the deployment cycle
- Recommend professional development and educational opportunities to school staff working with military youth

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METHODS

- Teachers, counselors, and administrators from 12 schools serving large Army installations and 16 school staff members from other schools serving National Guard and Army Reserve families participated in focus groups or individual phone-interviews.
- This article focuses on military children with parents serving in the Army, Army Reserve, and National Guard.
- Twenty-four focus groups and 16 telephone interviews were conducted in the spring of 2008.

PARTICIPANTS

- The school staff members (N = 148) that participated were from 11 states throughout the country.
- Schools on base were mostly comprised of military students (98%), while schools off base (n = 9) had a student body in which 30-70% were military students.
- No other demographic information regarding participants was provided.

LIMITATIONS

- Schools that were selected by the researchers for participation may differ from those schools that were not selected. In turn, the cultures at each of the schools may have influenced the willingness to participate as well as the responses of individual participants.
- Reports on stress and resiliency were based on interviews with school staff, and there is no indication of the adult-student relationship. Many other factors may be missed when using only one reporter, particularly when it is a third-party report.
- Participants may be trying to respond in the "best" way or researchers may influence responses (intentionally or unintentionally) by asking leading questions or overlooking unexpected findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:
- Investigate the effects of combat deployments versus non-combat deployment would benefit research, as it would allow for a better understanding of the different effects each type may have
- Explore the effects of parental deployment at different phases of deployment (e.g., pre-deployment, reintegration) as well as different stages of development (e.g., infancy, adolescence, young adulthood)
- Examine communication between the military, schools, programs, and families, to assess the status quo, highlight strengths, and point to areas for improvement

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design
★☆☆
Limited
Research Plan
and Sample

Methods
★★☆
Appropriate
Measurement
and Analysis

Limitations
★★☆
Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
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