

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

Family Communication Patterns and Adolescent Experiences During Parental Military Deployment and Reintegration: The Role of Inappropriate Parental Disclosures and Perceived Family Understanding

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SUMMARY: Family communication patterns in military families can have a significant impact on family resilience and military readiness. This study investigated adolescents' adjustment in military families during parental deployment and reintegration. The family communication patterns explored included: conformity orientation (i.e., a focus on hierarchy, obedience, and similar beliefs as parents), conversation orientation (i.e., conversational openness about a wide array of topics among all family members), and adolescents' perception of their families' understanding of their experiences.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Family focus on hierarchy and obedience was associated with more adolescent difficulties during deployment and reintegration.
- Greater family conversational openness was associated with greater inappropriate disclosures (e.g., discussion of the deployed parent being in danger, challenges of being a single parent) by at-home parents during deployment, but also with greater family understanding.
- Adolescents experienced fewer difficulties during parental deployment when their families demonstrated greater family understanding and limited inappropriate disclosures.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education for military parents who are at home during deployment regarding appropriate and inappropriate disclosures to adolescents
- Offer opportunities for at-home parents during deployment and reintegration to increase social support among peers (i.e., other at-home parents)
- Provide information regarding parent behaviors that can improve appropriate conversation orientation

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Develop family support programs to improve positive family communication in military families pre-deployment and during reintegration
- Integrate parent and family education into expected reintegration events for returning Service members for whom it is relevant
- Recommend professional education regarding family communication patterns in deployment and reintegration for professionals who work with Service members and their families

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METHODS

- Participants provided information via a self-report questionnaire during reintegration events.
- Data were gathered regarding family communication patterns, positive and negative experiences during parent deployment and reintegration, family understanding, and parental inappropriate disclosures during deployment.
- Due to data collection structure and lack of variability in some measures, family understanding and parental inappropriate disclosures were each measured by a single item in the statistical analyses.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 106 adolescents from 72 National Guard families who participated in reintegration events from 2010 to 2015.
- Adolescents were 9-17 years old, 52% male and 48% female. Family structures included two-parent families (60%), step-families (20%), single-parent families (3%), and unknown (17%).
- Adolescents' parents were enlisted (74%) or officers (26%) and had served on one (44%), two (30%), or three or more (27%) deployments.
- No race/ethnicity demographic data were provided.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants volunteered to participate during reintegration events and it is unclear whether they are representative of all reintegrating military families, which limits generalizability.
- Data were gathered at one time point, during reintegration, so adolescents' recall of difficulties during deployment may have been inaccurate, which may limit the accuracy of their responses.
- There is no pre-test, control group, or longitudinal measure, limiting the ability to draw conclusions about causality.
- Two of the measures were based on single items and there were not any tests to ensure that the data measured what they proposed they were measuring.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine whether formal or informal parent social supports reduce inappropriate disclosures to children
- Analyze the nature of family understanding to determine whether and how at-home parent, deployed parent, and/or sibling understanding have an impact on child functioning
- Further explore how conversation orientation and inappropriate parental disclosure are related

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