

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

Strong, Safe, and Secure: Negotiating Early Fathering and Military Service Across the Deployment Cycle

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SUMMARY: National Guard or Reserve Service member fathers who had been separated from their children due to deployment participated in individual interviews about their beliefs and attributions regarding their young children. Qualitative analyses were used to identify opportunities to support healthy family functioning across the deployment cycle. Results indicated that fathers had specific hopes for their child's healthy development if positive characteristics but felt unable to support the development of these characteristics due to their own emotional issues and distance.

KEY FINDINGS:

- All fathers described clear hopes and dreams for their children's healthy development, including being strong, confident, and competent.
- Fathers reported that they struggled to manage and help their children regulate negative emotions because their children's negative emotions evoked thoughts, feelings, and memories of military and combat experiences.
- Many fathers reported that they experienced loss related to their military experiences; this loss led them to try to maintain an emotional distance from their partners and children.
- Fathers reported that they relied on their parenting partners to help readjust to the parenting role after deployment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer parenting classes for military fathers that teach skills for managing their children's negative emotions and difficult behaviors
- Provide supportive classes for military couples (both parents) focusing on co-parenting and building parenting skills
- Disperse information regarding possible mental health symptoms Service members may experience following deployment and how these symptoms can influence parenting and family functioning and way to cope effectively

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend increasing access to parenting programs for military parents
- Encourage programs addressing Service member or Veteran's trauma-related symptoms to specifically address issues surrounding parenting
- Continue to support programs that work with military families during reintegration

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METHODS

- Participants were drawn from a larger study piloting a parent and mental health intervention. They had deployed during the previous two years, and had at least one child under the age of seven.
- Participants were recruited via flyers at a Veterans Administration (VA) facility in Michigan and at reintegration weekends.
- Fathers were interviewed in their homes regarding their beliefs and attributions about their young children and also completed a demographic questionnaire.

PARTICIPANTS

- Fourteen male Service members from the National Guard or Reserve participated.
- Age range of fathers was 22-40 years old; 75% were married.
- Eighty-three percent of the fathers were White.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was small and homogenous; therefore, results may not generalize to other military members or Active Duty personnel.
- The participants were primarily White, had high levels of PTSD symptoms, and were enrolling in a parenting class, all of which may bias results.
- Descriptions of the qualitative analyses were vague, making it difficult to fully understand their analytic procedure.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Supplement this qualitative data with quantitative measures, examining possible associations with other parent and child outcomes
- Evaluate existing parenting programs to measure their ability to improve fathers' efficacy in dealing with their children's negative emotions and behaviors
- Explore whether similar issues are common among mothers who were separated from their children due to a deployment

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