

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

The Psychosocial Effects of Deployment on Military Children

Flake, E. M., Davis, B. E., Johnson, P. L., & Middleton, L. S. (2009). The psychosocial effects of deployment on military children. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics, 30*(4), 271-278. doi:10.1097/DBP.0b013e3181aac6e4

SUMMARY: Army parents with deployed spouses reported on the psychosocial functioning of their elementary school aged children using standardized psychosocial health and stress measures. The results were compared to a national sample, and used to identify potential predictors of those children at “high risk” for psychosocial morbidity during wartime deployment of a parent. Analysis of parent reports suggests that children with a deployed parent had significantly higher levels of psychosocial difficulties, and that caregiving parents had more parenting stress and overall life stress than a comparable national sample.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Per parental report, children with a deployed parent had significantly higher levels of physical, emotional, and psychosocial difficulties than a national sample.
- Higher levels of parenting stress predicted poorer psychosocial functioning among children.
- The 33 (out of 101) children identified as high risk in this sample were more likely to have parents who perceived poor military or community support, had less education, and were young spouses of enlisted Service members.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer curriculum aimed at assisting spouses of deployed Service members with managing stresses during deployment to minimize difficulties for both spouses and children
- Provide specific modules on managing parenting stress during deployment such as the usefulness of self-care activities, peer support, informal networks of support, and physical exercise
- Offer support groups for military children struggling to cope with the deployment of a parent

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend extending resources to at-home parents to help them with the stressors associated with single parenting during the Service member’s absence
- Encourage regular communication and collaboration between at-home parents and school personnel, especially during deployments.
- Continue to support programs that offer services to military families throughout the deployment cycle

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METHODS

- Spouses of deployed Army members with a child between five and 12 years of age were recruited through a large military installation in the northwest U.S.
- Parent self-report surveys were used to assess child psychosocial functioning, parent stress, overall life stress, and demographic variables.
- Parent reports were compared to national standardized norms.

PARTICIPANTS

- One hundred and one parents with a deployed Army spouse (86% Female; 65% White, 13% Latino/Latina, 9% Asian-American, 9% Black, 4% other)
- Children ranged in age from 5 to 12 years (Mean = 8.6, SD = 2.2); No data reported on parent age.
- The majority of the sample were enlisted Service members (77%); 67% deployed within last six months, while 33% deployed within last 15 months.

LIMITATIONS

- As cross-sectional data were used, the direction of effects cannot be established; it may be that having a child with more difficulties results in more stress for parents.
- Measures of psychosocial difficulties in children were reported by parents, not measured clinically; parental stress levels may interfere with their perceptions of a child's distress.
- This was a self-selected, convenience sample in one location. Participants may differ from non-participants in important ways that were not assessed.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore if parenting stress during deployment(s) has long-term effects on child psychosocial functioning
- Investigate whether families of non-deployed Service members report similar stress as families of deployed Service members
- Include a wider age range of children, additional locations, and differences in military rank and service branch

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