

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Wartime Military Deployment and Increased Pediatric Mental and Behavioral Health Complaints

Gorman, G. H., Eide, M., & Hisle-Gorman, E. (2010). Wartime military deployment and increased pediatric mental and behavioral health complaints. *Pediatrics*, 126(6), 1058–1066. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-2856

**SUMMARY:** Researchers aimed to determine the effect of parental military deployment on the relative rate of outpatient visits for mental and behavioral health disorders in children aged three to eight years. Children with a deployed parent had a higher rate of outpatient visits for some mental health and behavioral health issues, but not all. This is particularly true for older children with deployed fathers.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Medical records documented that children, between ages three and eight, with a deployed parent increased their outpatient mental and behavioral health visits by 11%; reported behavioral disorders increased 19% and stress disorders increased 18%.
- Mental health and behavioral conditions came to clinical attention at higher rates during parental military deployment for older (compared to younger) children, for children of married (compared to single) parents, and for children of male (compared to female) military Service members.
- The severity and significance of the increased rates is important when considering the general 11% decrease in all health care visits for this population when a parent was deployed.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Continue to offer additional supports and resources for addressing children's behavioral issues and reducing children's stress during parental deployment
- Offer workshops to military parents regarding normative children's responses to deployment with consideration for child's age and the stage of deployment
- Distribute information regarding resources and services available to military families during the deployment cycle

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support services that help families with children during deployments
- Recommend age based health screening for adjustment issues (in a school or health provider setting) to identify early adjustment problems and offer referrals
- Recommend training for service providers who work with military families regarding the impact of deployment on children's mental and behavioral health

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## METHODS

- This was a retrospective cohort study. Records of children of Active Duty personnel during fiscal years 2006 and 2007 were linked with their parent's deployment records.
- Mental and behavioral health visits were identified by using codes from the International Classification of Diseases, 9th Revision.
- This study focused on Active Duty military parents. Children of National Guard or Reserve personnel were excluded.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The sample comprised 642,397 children aged three to eight years and 442,722 military parents, 32% deployed during the study.
- The mean age of children in the sample was 5 years (SD = 1.9 years); 51% were male, and 68% were White.
- The majority of military parents were male (90%) and senior enlisted (66%); parents served in the Army (45%), Air Force (26%), Navy (13%), and Marines (7%).

## LIMITATIONS

- This study focuses on Active Duty Service members; hence, results may not generalize to National Guard or Reserve personnel.
- Parental mental health conditions were not factored into the analyses, which may have biased the data (e.g., extant research suggests that depressed mothers perceive their children's mental health problems more frequently than non-depressed mothers).
- The study did not subcategorize military deployments into pre-deployment, deployment or post-deployment phases; there may be specific periods in a deployment cycle when certain mental or behavioral health complaints are more likely to surface.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct longitudinal studies to determine if the effects of deployment on parent-child separation persist into adulthood
- Control for parental mental health conditions while calculating the impact of deployment on child behavioral and mental health
- Distinguish between the effects of multiple and/or extended deployments and deployment length, as well as potential differences between the effects of the pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment phases of the deployment cycle

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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