Impact of Parents Wartime Military Deployment and Injury on Their Young Children's Safety and Mental Health


SUMMARY: Young children of Active Duty military parents participated in a study assessing the impact of parental deployment and combat injury on children’s mental health, injuries, and maltreatment. Young children of deployed and combat-injured military parents had more ambulatory care visits for mental health, injuries, and child maltreatment after their military parent returned from deployment.

KEY FINDINGS:
- In the post-deployment period, visits for mental healthcare, child injuries, and child maltreatment were elevated in children whose parents deployed relative to children of non-deployed parents.
- Relative to the deployment period, children of deployed parents (injured and non-injured) had higher rates of mental health and injury visits post deployment.
- Children of injured parents had higher rates of child maltreatment care in the post-deployment period than during the deployment period.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:
Programs could:
- Offer support groups during reintegration to help families of Service member who experienced combat-related injuries
- Provide concrete information to military parents and school personnel regarding normative versus problematic child responses to deployment
- Disseminate information regarding how combat-related injuries can influence Service members’ mental health and military family functioning

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:
Policies could:
- Continue to support programs that help combat injured Service members and their families adjust
- Support the development of in-home help for combat injured parents immediately post-deployment
- Continue to support programs for identification and prevention of child maltreatment in military families

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METHODS
- Children’s healthcare utilization data and records of parent combat injuries were obtained from the TRICARE Management Activity database.
- Injury visits were limited to new injuries and child maltreatment, and mental and behavioral health visits were identified by the international classification for disease code.
- The Defense Manpower Data Center supplied data on start and stop dates for all military deployments and demographic information on military parents.

PARTICIPANTS
- A total of 487,460 youth between the ages of 3-8 years were included in the sample (51% male).
- Twelve-percent of participants had a parent who deployed in 2006 and about 17% of deployed parents sustained a combat-related injury.
- Service member parents who deployed (injured and uninjured) were more likely to be male, younger, and have younger children compared to parents who did not deploy.
- No information regarding military branch was provided.

LIMITATIONS
- The study used diagnostic codes that were assessed by individual providers; such diagnoses may include some biases.
- The study period was limited (fiscal year 2006), which may underestimate the impact of deployment on children’s mental and physical health.
- Dual military families were not included which may limit the generalizability of these findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Examine the impact of parental mental versus physical health injuries on children’s wellbeing
- Explore factors that protect children and promote resilience in military families impacted by deployment
- Conduct interviews with families in which the Service member experienced an injury to more fully explore their experiences and needs

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design
- Appropriate Research Plan and Sample

Methods
- Appropriate Measurement and Analysis

Limitations
- Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works