

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Family Communication Across the Military Deployment Experience: Child and Spouse Report of Communication Frequency and Quality and Associated Emotions, Behaviors and Reactions

Houston, J. B., Pfefferbaum, B., Sherman, M. D., Melson, A. G., & Brand, M. W. (2013). Family communication across the military deployment experience: Child and spouse report of communication frequency and quality and associated emotions, behaviors and reactions. *Journal of Loss and Trauma, 18*(2), 103-119. doi:10.1080/15325024.2012.684576

SUMMARY: This study assessed the frequency and quality of communication between National Guard Soldiers, their female spouses (n = 13), and their children (n = 13) before, during, and after deployment. Communication during deployment with siblings was related to positive child outcomes; however, using text messaging to communicate with a deployed parent was related to negative child outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Text messaging with a deployed parent was related to children feeling angry about deployment or being upset or stressed around parents.
- Quality and frequency of communication among children and their siblings was associated with beneficial outcomes (e.g., less anger toward mothers pre-deployment, less loneliness during deployment, less anger and loneliness post-deployment).
- At all phases of deployment, more and better quality female spouse communication with her children and with her deployed Service member related to her better anger management and decreased stress reactions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education for military families regarding the importance of communication for children of deployed Service members, including which kinds of communication tend to be more helpful than others
- Offer opportunities for connection and socialization for children who have experienced or are currently experiencing parental deployment to encourage mutual support among these youth
- Help connect military children and their families with camp and recreational activities, such as Operation Purple Camps provided through the National Military Family Association

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Develop and support programs that offer military youth activities to increase interaction and communication with parents and siblings
- Support the provision of summer camps and other recreational events for military children, which may provide opportunities for youth to interaction with others experiencing similar issues related to parental deployment
- Recommend education of professionals who work with military families regarding the most and least beneficial types of communication for family members during deployment

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Spouses and any interested child 8-18 years old of a Service member in the Oklahoma National Guard participated in three in-person interviews (one each pre-, during, and post-deployment).
- Participants were asked questions about the frequency and quality of communication with the deployed family member, about the child's emotions and behavior (both parent and children report), and their own emotional reactions to deployment.
- The effects of frequency and quality of communication, who family members communicated with, and how family members communicated on the well-being of spouses and children of Service members was examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Non-deployed female spouses (n= 13) and children (n = 13; 8 with siblings in the study) of Service members in OIF were sampled
- Spouses were 77% White, 15% Black, or 8% another race/ethnicity; the majority were currently employed (85%).
- Children (69% male) had an average age of 11 years and were from nine different families; five had no siblings and eight had at least one sibling in the study.

LIMITATIONS

- This study used a very small convenience sample of National Guard families and families with only male Service members from a single state and may not be representative of the military as a whole.
- The independence of the data were weakened by including parents and children from the same families and not accounting for interdependency in the analyses.
- All measures used were non-standard and developed for this study, so no psychometric information was available.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a similar study in a larger, more representative sample (e.g., including male spouses) and using standardized measures to help produce more generalizable and reliable results
- Examine the interdependence of parent and child ratings to illuminate relationships within families.
- Explore child and spouse motivations for communicating at all phases of deployment to inform how to help improve communication

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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