

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Parental Deployment and Youth in Military Families: Exploring Uncertainty and Ambiguous Loss

Huebner, A. J., Mancini, J. A., Wilcox, R. M., Grass, S. R., & Grass, G. A. (2007). Parental deployment and youth in military families: Exploring uncertainty and ambiguous loss. *Family Relations*, 56(2), 112-122.
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SUMMARY: Military youth whose parent was deployed were recruited from one of several National Military Family Association (NMFA) camps. In this study, youth completed semi-structured interviews regarding uncertainty, loss, resilience, adjustment, and the ambiguity of having a parent deployed. Major response themes that emerged were overall perceptions of uncertainty and loss, boundary ambiguity, concerns about nondeployed parents, and changes in mental health.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Approximately 32% of participants made statements indicative of depressive symptoms. Adolescents reported signs consistent with depression, specifically lost interest in regular activities, isolation, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, sadness, and crying.
- Adolescents may stifle their emotions so that they can act as if they are okay, when in fact they are not. One seemingly common reaction to emotional suppression is lashing out.
- Thirty-five participants reported that the emotional climate of the family may become more intense during parental deployment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide support for youth while integrating a family education component addressing ambiguous loss in families dealing with a family member's deployment
- Offer education about the signs and symptoms of depression to both youth and adults to provide families with greater skills in identifying mental health concerns and seeking help when needed
- Offer a component to assist youth in developing communication and self-expression skills to articulate their experiences of ambiguity

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training of professionals who serve and work with military families on the physical, cognitive, and emotional development that occurs during adolescence and how parents' deployment can impact normal development
- Encourage the use of evidence-based intervention and prevention programs for military youth who live on installations
- Promote reintegration programs that include attention to assisting Service members' family in adjusting to the Service member's return

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited from NMFA camps from five states: Washington, Hawaii, Texas, Virginia, and Georgia.
- Focus groups were conducted with youth whose parent(s) were deployed. Each youth had to provide proof of parental consent in order to be included in the study, and semi-structured focus group interviews lasted about 90 minutes.
- Researchers analyzed youth's responses for themes related to what issues might impede adolescent development.

PARTICIPANTS

- One hundred seven youth between the ages of 12 and 18 years participated; 54% were males (46% were females).
- Racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 61% White, 17% Black, 10% Biracial, 7% Latino/Latina, 3% Asian-American, and 1% Native American.
- Military families represented a number of military components: 39% Army, 23% National Guard (Army and Air Force), 13% Reserves (all branches), 10% Air Force, 4% Marines, and 3% Navy.

LIMITATIONS

- Individuals who participated may differ from non-participants in a way that is not measured, but affected the outcome variables. For instance, those that participated may have been functioning better (or worse) than those who did not participate.
- The focus group format may have created pressure for youth to respond in the “best” way.
- Researchers may have assumed the meaning of words or phrases, or they may have overlooked unexpected findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Replicate this study in a larger, more demographically diverse sample
- Investigate the impact of ambiguous loss by using more comprehensive and more objective measures of academic performance, as compared to self-report measures
- Gather data from military youth during each stage of the deployment cycle to determine if the impacts on their development differ during each stage of their parents' deployment

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