

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Children's Response to Parental Separation During Operation Desert Storm

Jensen, P. S., Martin, D., & Watanabe, H. (1996). Children's response to parental separation during Operation Desert Storm. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 35(4), 433-441.
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SUMMARY: In this study, the authors compared children and families with and without a deployed Service member-parent prior to and during Operation Desert Storm in an effort to determine the effects of Operation Desert Storm on military children and their parents. Three hundred and eighty-three children and the remaining caretaking parent completed self- and parent-report instruments concerning child and family functioning (child behavior, depression and anxiety and parent depression, adjustment and coping) and life stressors.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Children of deployed personnel had elevated symptoms of depression as did their parents (as measured by self-report) when compared to non-deployed parents and their children. These differences maintained when controlling for these measures pre-deployment and for intervening variables like rank or child age.
- Families and children of deployed personnel experienced more life stressors than non-deployed parents and their children.
- Boys and younger children seem to be more vulnerable to the effects of deployment.
- Deployment rarely caused pathological levels of symptoms in otherwise healthy children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups (both formal and informal) for military spouses may prove beneficial to families with deployed Service members and should continue to be supported and encouraged
- Offer workshops where children receive an education component regarding deployment to assist children in mediating the potential effects of parental deployment
- Provide education on building support and resiliency to particularly vulnerable groups (boys and younger children)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage screenings in school or health-care settings for younger children to identify those most vulnerable to depressive symptoms during deployment
- Continue to support programs that offer services to military families during deployment
- Encourage collaboration between DoD and community-based programs that offer support services to military children coping with mental health issues throughout the deployment cycle

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METHODS

- The authors used cross-sectional and longitudinal survey data completed by mothers and their children.
- Measures collected from children included the Child Behavior Checklist, the Children's Depression Inventory, and the Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale. Measures collected from Parents included the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, a short version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, the Life Events Record, the Psychological Coping Resources scale, and the Social Assets Scale.
- This study focused on mothers and children from military families (branch and component not specified).

PARTICIPANTS

- This sample included 383 children and their caretakers.
- The majority of the participants were White (53%), 31% Black, 9% Latino, and 7% from other ethnic backgrounds.
- Mothers were on average 34 years of age (range not specified); children were between the ages of four and 17 years (the average age was not specified), and 55% of the children were male (45% were female).

LIMITATIONS

- Those 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 than those who did not participate.
- Parents and children may be trying to respond in the "best" way.
- Military branch and service component were not specified and limits what can be understood regarding the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate the possible long-term effects into adulthood for children raised during Desert Storm operations
- Examine possible differences by branch and/or component
- Continue to explore the effects of parental wartime deployment on children based on age and gender of the child

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