

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Navy

## Internalizing and Externalizing Behavior of Children With Enlisted Navy Mothers Experiencing Military-Induced Separation

Kelley, M. L., Hock, E., Smith, K. M., Jarvis, M. S., Bonney, J. F., & Gaffney, M. A. (2001). Internalizing and externalizing behavior of children with enlisted Navy mothers experiencing military-induced separation. *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40(4), 464-471. doi:10.1097/00004583-200104000-00016

**SUMMARY:** Survey data were used to examine children's internalizing (i.e., fearful, sad, overcontrolled) and externalizing (i.e., aggression, noncompliant, undercontrolled) behaviors across three groups (i.e., Navy children with deployed mothers, Navy children with non-deployed mothers, children with civilian mothers). Differences between children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors of Navy non-deployed and deployed mothers and civilian mothers were found.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Comparing all three groups of mothers, no significant differences existed in the levels of child internalizing problems, although children with deployed mothers exhibited slightly higher levels of internalizing behavior than children with non-deploying mothers.
- Children of Navy mothers (deployed and non-deployed) had slightly higher levels of externalizing behavior than civilian children.
- When examining the Navy children only, both mothers and childcare providers reported higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems in children with deployed mothers than non-deployed mothers.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Disseminate information regarding normative versus problematic child responses to deployment and strategies to cope with distress
- Provide training and professional development for childcare providers who work with military children
- Offer support groups to children while their Service member parent is deployed

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage collaboration among DoD and community-based organizations to provide streamlined care to Service members and their children coping with internalizing or externalizing behaviors
- Continue to support programs that offer services to military families and their children throughout the deployment cycle
- Recommend education to service providers working with military families regarding how deployment can influence children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors

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## METHODS

- Navy mothers with young children who were scheduled to deploy from Virginia or those from four identified shore commands were invited to participate in the study via a briefing, letters, and an ad in the Navy newspaper.
- Civilian women were recruited through private and public women's health clinics, pediatric offices, and parenting classes.
- Survey data were collected pre- and post-deployment from Navy mothers (non-deployed and deployed) and at similar intervals from civilian mothers. Childcare providers of Navy were also sent the survey.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were Navy mothers who experienced deployment (n = 52), Navy mothers who did not deploy (n = 75), and civilian mothers (n = 32) who had at least one child.
- The majority of mothers were White (Navy = 57%, civilian = 72%), and were on average 28 years old.
- Children were between eight months to eight years old (M = 3.1 years) and had similar gender compositions (Navy children = 51% male, civilian children = 50% male).

## LIMITATIONS

- Mother's level of functioning was not measured but may have influenced their perception of their child's behavior and bias results.
- Groups were not matched in terms of the child's age, which could have an influence on children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors.
- Only Navy mothers and their children were included in the sample; therefore, results may not be generalizable of other branches of the military.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the long-term effects of deployment on children's behaviors
- Explore the characteristics and processes that build resiliency in military children who experience periods of separation due to deployment
- Examine whether length of deployment has an effect on children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors or just deployment in general

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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