

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Experiences of Military Youth During a Family Member's Deployment: Changes, Challenges, and Opportunities

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SUMMARY: Deployments have a great impact on military families; however, little is known about how military-affiliated children experience family life during a deployment. This study interviewed 33 children of Service members about their experiences during deployment. Results revealed that children experienced changes and challenges due to deployment, but they also reported positive opportunities of deployment and showed resilience.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Children reported the following experiences during deployment: more chores (36%), changes to everyday activities (33%), more responsibilities for the at-home parent (27%), missing family traditions (21%), emotional upheaval (18%), and family feels incomplete (15%).
- Children experienced the following challenges: disruptions to daily routines (27%), emotional difficulties (27%), missing the deployed family member (21%), increased family conflict (18%), and expanded responsibilities (18%).
- Children saw the following opportunities: increased family cohesion (39%), independence (30%), new experience as a military family (15%), and being prepared for future deployments (12%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate children and adolescents of Service members regarding the possible changes of family life during the Service members' deployment
- Develop creative ways (e.g., provide bus fare) to involve military-affiliated children and adolescents in activities which they may otherwise be unable to participate
- Provide workshops for military spouses that focus on parenting skills during their spouses' deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that may increase family readiness during the deployment cycle
- Recommend professional development for professionals working with children and adolescents of Service members to better understand the changes and challenges that military families encounter
- Promote military families' community participation and engagement so that military spouses and children can support each other during Service members' deployment

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited from a five-day residential camp for children of Service members; children who had experienced the deployment of a family member qualified for the study.
- Each child completed a one-on-one interview which lasted for an average of 17.52 minutes (SD = 7.74). The interview consisted of questions about the changes, challenges, and opportunities the child faced during a family member's deployment.
- Data were analyzed to extract common themes, and the percentage of participants who mentioned each theme was recorded.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 33 children of Service members (21 boys and 12 girls) with an average age of 11.39 years (age range = 11-13 years, SD = 1.11).
- The deployed family members were mostly fathers (n = 30), but one child had both parents deployed, one had a deployed stepfather, and one had a deployed brother. Service members represented the following military branches: Army (42%), Army National Guard (45%), Navy (7%), Air Force (3%), and Air National Guard (3%).
- The race/ethnicity of participants was not specified.

LIMITATIONS

- Some children experienced a family member's deployment over two years ago; therefore, the study may be subject to memory bias.
- Children were recruited solely from one camp, so their opinions may not represent the perspectives of children who did not go to the camp.
- Each interview only lasted for 17.52 minutes on average; therefore, it may not comprehensively capture children's perspectives.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Broaden the age range of participants so that younger children and older adolescents' opinions can also be heard
- Recruit more participants from other sources to increase the generalizability of the study
- Conduct more comprehensive interviews with children to fully capture their perspectives of deployment

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