

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

The Long War and Parental Combat Deployment: Effects on Military Children and At-Home Spouses

Lester, P., Peterson, K., Reeves, J., Knauss, L., Glover, D., Mogil, C., ... Beardslee, W. (2010). The long war and parental combat deployment: Effects on military children and at-home spouses. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49(4), 310-320. doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2010.01.003

SUMMARY: Survey data were utilized to examine the impact of parental combat deployments, parental distress, and cumulative duration of parent deployment on child adjustment (i.e., internalizing, externalizing, depression, and anxiety) in families with currently deployed and recently returned Service members. Results indicate that parental deployment can negatively influence child adjustment during and following deployment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Children with either a deployed or recently returned parent demonstrated resilience, with adjustment and depression levels comparable to community norms; however, anxiety was high for youth in both deployment groups: 32% of the children with recently returned parents and 25% of the children with currently deployed parents had clinically significant anxiety symptoms.
- Cumulative length of parental combat-related deployments predicted increased child depression and externalizing symptoms as well as caregiver depressive symptoms, global distress, and posttraumatic stress severity.
- Parental distress, whether reported by caregiving parents or Service members, predicted child internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops to military youth with age-appropriate strategies for emotion-regulation to help children cope with anxious thoughts and feelings
- Provide trainings to military parents regarding ways to support the development of their children's problem-solving and emotion regulation skills
- Distribute informational packets to military families prior to deployment regarding the programs and services available to them throughout the deployment cycle

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support family-focused programs for military families impacted by deployment
- Support programs aimed at enhancing family readiness
- Encourage collaboration among the Department of Defense and community-based programs that offer support to military spouses during deployment in an effort to provide comprehensive care

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METHODS

- Children and their at-home civilian and/or recently returned active duty parent were surveyed.
- The sample included children of Active Duty Army or Marine Corps parents currently deployed or recently returned from Afghanistan or Iraq.
- Participants were recruited via installation wide mailings that specified the purpose of the study and the eligibility criteria.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 272 children, 163 at-home civilian parents and 65 recently returned active duty parent.
- Forty-five percent of the children in the sample were female, with a mean age of 8.5 (SD = 2.0) years.
- All at-home civilians were female (100%), with an average age of 33.4 (SD = 6.4) years.
- The majority of Service members were non-commissioned officer (61%).

LIMITATIONS

- Participants volunteered for the study and therefore, those who choose to participate may be functioning (better or worse) than families who choose not to participate.
- Participants included only Active Duty parents in the Army and Marine Corps; therefore, results may not be generalizable to families in other military branches of those in the Reserves and National Guard.
- The use of self-report surveys means that parents and children may be trying to respond in the “best” way, which could bias results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the effects of children’s participation in community afterschool and youth development programs as a protective factor that may affect family distress during parental deployment
- Explore the bidirectional effect of parental distress and child symptoms over time
- Replicate this study with inclusion of all four of the military services, systematically examining the effects of deployment on family adjustment within various branches and ranks

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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