

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Army

## Family Members as Boundary Managers: Behaviors That Promote and Limit Service Members' Involvement in Daily Family Life

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**SUMMARY:** Families must balance closeness and distance in boundaries with a deployed family member in order to maintain a relationship and cope with the separation in healthy ways. Family members and Reservists were interviewed about behaviors that either promoted or limited Reservists' involvement in family life. Generally, besides separated couples, family members worked hard to keep themselves and their children connected with the Reservist during deployment.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Family relationships were facilitated through contact (e.g., care packages, letters, calls), child reminders (e.g., homecoming countdown calendar, coloring pictures for the Reservist), and Reservist reminders (e.g., child's pictures, updates on child).
- Family members promoted Reservists' involvement by soliciting their opinions during decisions.
- Many family members unintentionally limited Reservists' family involvement by assuming responsibilities and withholding information that might upset the Reservist during deployment.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate families about how to redistribute responsibilities post-deployment by teaching healthy communication and negotiation skills
- Offer workshops for Service members post-deployment to discuss how new ways of coping and managing boundaries with family may be more adaptive than those used during deployment
- Provide programs for family members of deployed Service members to offer ideas and engage in activities (e.g., preparing care packages, children coloring pictures) to maintain communication

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage research on the development of new modes of communication for deployed Service members and their families
- Continue to support programs that help family members cope with separation from a deployed Service member
- Promote the development of programs that encourage military families to plan ahead about and discuss communication and responsibilities during deployment

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## METHODS

- Army Reservists, who had deployed in OIF from 2003-2004, and their family members were recruited at family support groups, unit headquarters, and via mail, with an 11% response rate.
- Two weeks post-deployment, Reservists and family members completed an interview about family dynamics during deployment and strategies for adjusting to separation.
- Behaviors that limited or promoted Reservists' involvement in family life during deployment were coded.

## PARTICIPANTS

- The 28 participants included 13 Army Reservists (85% male), with an average age of 28.62 years (SD = 8.49), and 15 family members (93% female), with an average age of 39.12 (SD = 13.11).
- Participants were primarily White (89%); family members were Reservists' spouses (53%), fiancés (13%), mothers (27%), and a grandmother (7%).
- Most Reservists had children (54%), had civilian employment (85%), and had only experienced one deployment (77%); all were enlisted and had served an average of 7.41 years in the military.

## LIMITATIONS

- Results from the small, self-selected Army Reservist sample may not generalize to other military families.
- Interactions during deployment were retrospectively reported, potentially decreasing accuracy of the results.
- With several advances in technology since 2003-2004, interactions between deployed Service members and their families may now be quite different than at the time of the study.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine how different strategies of promoting or limiting deployed family members' involvement in family life impacts family functioning and family member well-being
- Explore Service members' preferences about the amount and types of information they would like to receive from their families during deployment
- Investigate the positive and negative mental health impacts of hiding information to protect other family members by both deployed Service members and their families

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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