When a Parent Goes Off to War:
Exploring the Issues Faced by Adolescents and Their Families

11 focus groups were conducted with a total of 98 participants (adolescents, parents, and school personnel) regarding the impact of parental deployment on adolescent children of military families. Adolescents reported increased anxiety and stress, as well as shifts in family roles and relationships. Families reported a variety of coping strategies for both the deployment and post-deployment periods.

Key Findings:

- Adolescents reported positive (independence and greater sense of responsibility) and negative (anxiety, stress, concern for safety of parent, parental relationship troubles) impacts of parental deployment.
- Parents described using many coping methods during deployment such as maintaining a positive attitude for the children, sharing struggles with other military peers, and using technology to maintain contact with spouse.
- Both adolescents and adults (parents and school personnel) felt that schools were inadequately prepared to deal with parental deployment stressors among military students, and reported that adolescent boys appeared to have a more difficult time recognizing and confronting emotional stress.
- The re-entry of a deployed parents back into the family can often cause stress; adolescents report feeling as if they do not now the deployed parent and that parents does not know them, and changes in family routines can provoke conflict.

Implications for Programs:

- Pre-deployment programs that include parent education and coping strategies/stress management might help military families prepare for the stress associated with deployment, especially regarding postdeployment reintegration and for families in predominantly nonmilitary communities.
- Programs that include professional training for school personnel could also offer additional opportunities for students to discuss deployment-related concerns.
- Programs could alert school staff when a student's deployed parent is returning, and offer staff information about how the reintegration process may be difficult for the child.
- In addition to K-12 schools and personnel, afterschool programs and staff may need professional development as well as alerts related to the return of a deployed parents.

Implications for Policies:

- Resources to provide programs for children and families who live in predominantly nonmilitary communities may be especially important as these families may endure greater stress.
- Continued attention to supporting military families throughout the deployment cycle.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future studies of the impacts of parental deployment could include a random sample of adolescent children and parents from all branches of the military.
- Individual interviews might be used in additional studies to further triangulate the themes identified by the focus groups.
- Longitudinal research may capture information regarding changing public and community sentiment regarding the military, an environmental concern noted by participants.

PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

Background Information

Methodology:

- 11 focus groups were conducted at 5 military installations in 5 states, with 98 total participants identified by Department of Defense contacts.
- Focus groups were separated into student, parent, and school personnel groupings, and all groups used the same focus group guide to allow for triangulation among the groups and the research teams.
- Transcriptions of the focus groups were analyzed using constant comparison coding methods, enabled by the Atlas.ti software package.

Participants:

- 39 adolescents (61% female), 24 military parents (71 % female, 67% White), and 35 school personnel (61% female, 74% White); total N = 98.
- Adolescents were between the ages of 12 and 18 years (M = 15 years), on average parents were 42 years of age.
- Adolescent ethnic composition: 56% White, 21% Black, 13% Hispanic, 3% Native American, 3% other
- Navy, Army, Marines, and Air Force were represented in the sample, and intentional effort was taken to recruit participants from families in different ranks of military service.

Limitations:

- Because of the referral-based recruitment and the lack of Reserve families, the participants might have differed from non-participants in a way that affected the outcomes.
- Focus groups can sometimes produce homogenized outcomes as some participants may not feel able to fully express personal thoughts in a group setting.
- Rising anti-war sentiments, mentioned as a concern by many participants, cannot be measured effectively in a cross-sectional study.

Assessing Research that Works

Research Design and Sample — Quality Rating: ★★☆

	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★☆)	Limited (★☆☆)	Questionable (☆☆☆)
The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was....	☐	☒	☐	☐

Research Methods — Quality Rating: ★★☆

	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★☆)	Limited (★☆☆)	Questionable (☆☆☆)
The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were...	☐	☒	☐	☐

Limitations — Quality Rating: ★★☆

	Excellent _Minor Limitations_ (★★★)	Appropriate _Few Limitations_ (★★☆)	Limited _Several Limitations_ (★☆☆)	Questionable _Many/Severe Limitations_ (☆☆☆)
The limitations of this study are…	☐	☒	☐	☐

Implications — Quality Rating: ★★☆

	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★☆)	Limited (★☆☆)	Questionable (☆☆☆)
The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are…	☐	☒	☐	☐

☐ Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications

Overall Quality Rating ★★☆