

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

The Effects of Military Deployment on Early Child Development

Nguyen, D. R., Ee, J., Berry-Cabán, C. S., & Hoedebecke, K. (2014). The effects of military deployment on early child development. *US Army Medical Department Journal*, 4, 81-86.

SUMMARY: An examination of the relationships between parental deployment and the cognitive and social-emotional development of preschool age children was conducted. The study divided U.S. Army families into two groups: the deployed group, in which one parent had been deployed at some point in the child's life and the non-deployed group, where neither parent had been deployed. Overall, the study found that parental deployment had adverse risks for young children.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Children of deployed parents failed the cognitive or social-emotional developmental screen at least twice as often as children whose parents did not deploy.
- There were significant differences between the two groups on gross motor and personal-social skills, two of the five subcomponents on the cognitive developmental screen.
- A trend appeared to exist between the length of parent deployment and frequency of failing a developmental screen; however, the relationship was not statistically significant.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide early childhood screening for early detection of developmental delays in young military-connected children
- Disseminate information among professionals working with returning Service members and their families on the importance of early intervention and childhood education
- Provide workshops that assist returning Service members and their families in parenting their young children

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue support for programs that address the unique challenges faced by young children who have a deployed parent
- Recommend education of professionals (e.g., child caregivers, mental health, and education professionals) on the emotional and educational needs of young children of military families
- Encourage collaboration among DoD programs and local early intervention programs to support young children of military families

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through a convenience sample of parents who brought their children in for routine appointments at a family medicine clinic.
- Basic data such as family demographics as well as military rank and length of deployments were collected. In addition, two child assessments were administered which measured a child's cognitive and social-emotional development.
- Data analysis examined the relationship between parental deployment and a child's cognitive and social-emotional development.

PARTICIPANTS

- The study sample consisted of 151 children of Active Duty Service members who were between the ages of 6 and 65 months.
- Deployed parents identified as 62% White, 14% Black, 14% Latino, 4% Asian American, 3% Native American, and 3% other; whereas, non-deployed parents identified as 67% White, 18% Black, 9% Latino, 2% Asian American, 4% Native American.
- Active Duty Service members' deployment ranged from 1-36 months, with the average being 11 months.

LIMITATIONS

- The tools used to assess children's cognitive and social-emotional level do not offer a diagnosis of developmental delay; therefore, findings should be interpreted with caution.
- Children in the study represented many different developmental stages and as such could experience deployment differently; thus, conclusions must not generalize to all children between the ages of 0-6 years.
- The study sample came from one military branch and one location; therefore, the findings are not generalizable to other military branches or contexts.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine in greater depth the relationship between deployment and early childhood development
- Explore the relationship between factors such as a military families' social network and parental level of education, deployment, and early childhood development
- Evaluate the potential positive effects of early intervention programs on military-connected young children

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