

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Coast Guard

Women in the National Guard: Experiences With Children During Deployment

Nilsson, J., Berkel, L., Kelly, P. J., Trummer, M., Maung, J., & Sukumaran, N. (2015). Women in the National Guard: Experiences with children during deployment. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 28(2), 113-131.
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SUMMARY: Female National Guard members who had children and had been deployed overseas completed interviews about their experience during reintegration. Mothers reported concerns for their children's well-being prior to deployment. Some mothers reported strong, negative reactions from their children during reintegration.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Participants worried about their children before and during their deployment.
- Prior to deployment, deciding who would care for children was especially stressful.
- The majority of women felt a sense of loss due to not being able to participate in important family events during deployment, such as birthdays and holidays.
- Children's responses to deployment and reintegration varied, including some strong negative reactions to their mothers' return.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop curricula focused on helping parents prepare children for deployment (e.g., how to ask family and friends for help, talking with children about what to expect)
- Implement support groups specifically for mothers preparing for or returning from deployment
- Provide courses for family members and friends caring for children during deployment focusing on recognizing problem behaviors in children and identifying community resources

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend collaboration between the Department of Defense and community-based organizations to provide support to deploying mothers
- Suggest professional development for community providers about how to support mothers post-deployment and their children
- Continue to provide infrastructure and support for Family Readiness Groups and other supports for Service members with children

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited via word of mouth, flyers posted at National Guard units, and announcements on units' Facebook pages.
- Participants completed semi-structured interviews about post-deployment family reintegration experiences.
- Interview questions focused on women's experiences of reintegration, children's reactions to deployment, and stressors experienced across the deployment cycle.

PARTICIPANTS

- Female National Guard members (N = 30) who had deployed outside the U.S. and had children participated.
- Participants had an average age of 39 years (SD = 10.5); 37% married, 43% divorced, 10% engaged or partnered.
- Over two-thirds (77%) had deployed once, 20% deployed twice, and 3% deployed three times.
- Over one-third (37%) had one child, 30% had two children, 33% had three or more children.

LIMITATIONS

- Recruitment primarily occurred through National Guard websites and Facebook; findings may be biased towards women who frequently use the Internet.
- Women were recruited from Midwestern states; results may not generalize to all female National Guard members living outside the Midwest.
- All data were retrospective and collected via self-report, both of which may introduce biases.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Employ longitudinal designs to examine mothers' experiences across the deployment cycle
- Include data from both female National Guard members and their children
- Compare mothers' and fathers' parenting experiences during the deployment cycle

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