

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Military Service Absences and Family Members' Mental Health: A Timeline Followback Assessment

Rodriguez, A. J., & Margolin, G. (2015). Military service absences and family members' mental health: A timeline followback assessment. *Journal of Family Psychology, 29*(4), 642-648. doi:10.1037/fam0000102

SUMMARY: Deployment can be a time of increased stress for Service members' families. In this study, researchers investigated how the number of Service member deployments, the cumulative length of those deployments, and the number of important family events missed were associated with spouse and child outcomes. Results indicated that deployment characteristics and communication during deployment were related to youth and spouse anxiety and depression.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth of Service members who missed more important family events had increased symptoms of depression.
- Wives of Service members who spent more time deployed experienced more symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- High levels of contact between youth and their deployed parent lessened the relationship between the amount of time the Service member was deployed and symptoms of anxiety.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Present workshops to help families develop a possible plan for communication during deployment
- Offer support groups for youth and spouses of deployed Service members so that they can develop peer support around their experiences
- Provide education about ways to include a deployed family member in important family events to the extent possible given the realities of deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage programs to support families while a parent is deployed, especially around important family events that the Service member may be missing
- Endorse training for those who work with military youth regarding the impacts of parental deployment
- Promote military family engagement with programming that fosters positive family communication

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through advertisements in various military-related media, announcements from groups supporting military families, and flyers posted in on-base hospitals and clinics.
- Youth and their mothers recruited for the study participated in an interview in which they wrote important family events, including Service member deployments, on calendars of the past five years.
- The participants also completed self-report measures of depression, anxiety, and amount of contact while Service member was deployed.

PARTICIPANTS

- Study participants included 70 mothers and their adolescents from families in which the father or stepfather was an Active Duty Service member. Youth participants were 54% female with an average age of 16 years old (SD = 1.2 years). Mothers' average age was 40 years old (SD=4.8 years).
- About a third (31%) of participants identified as Hispanic with regards to ethnicity. Regarding race, the participants identified as White (64%), Black (6%), American Indian or Alaska Native (4%), Asian (3%) Pacific Islander (2%), and multiracial or other (21%).
- Service members served in the Marines (53%), Navy (34%), Air Force (8%), Army (3%), or Coast Guard (2%).

LIMITATIONS

- Researchers assessed frequency of contact during deployment with one general question about all deployments, which does not take into account how contact may vary across different deployments.
- All participants were spouses and youth of male Service members; the relationships among these variables may differ when it is a female Service member who is deployed.
- The youth participants were adolescents and the Service members were midgrade enlisted personnel or higher, so results cannot be extended to younger children or junior enlisted personnel.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Measure various types of communication with Service members during different deployments in order to get a better understanding of communication's possible protective qualities
- Include younger children of Service members to study their experiences of deployment and communication
- Investigate the experience of children and spouses of female Service members during deployment

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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