Online Fathering: The Experience of First-Time Fatherhood in Combat-Deployed Troops

SUMMARY: Deployed Service members often miss important life events, including the birth of their first child. This study interviewed 17 male Service member whose first child was born during their most recent combat deployment. Each participant was asked an open-ended question about their experience of becoming a first-time father during deployment. Results revealed that these fathers experienced fear and anxiety due to the disruption of their protector and provider role, but also highlighted the importance of communication with their spouses.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Two main themes were extracted from the interviews: disruption of protector and provider role and restoration of the protector and provider role.
- The disruption of protector and provider role theme was divided into four sub-themes: worry about a traumatic and lonely childbirth, lost opportunity, guilt about being an absent father, and fear of death and disability.
- The restoration of the protector and provider role theme emphasized the role of communication in offsetting the influence of deployment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for male Service members whose children were born during deployment
- Development workshops for military families about how to cope with stress associated with deployment and childbirth
- Disseminate information about good communication skills for Service members and their spouses, especially for new parents

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education of professionals working with military families on common fear and anxiety of Service members whose children were born during their deployment
- Promote reintegration programs that focus on assisting new fathers in adjusting to their new role
- Continue to support marriage education programs that promote positive communication skills during deployment

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited at a post-deployment debriefing. Service members who returned from a combat deployment within one month and whose first child was born during the deployment period were eligible for the study.
- Each participant received an open-ended interview about their experience of becoming a first-time father during deployment.
- The interviews were transcribed and analyzed to extract main themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 17 male Service members; the average age of the sample was 23 years (SD = 2.3, age range = 19-26 years).
- Most participants were White (59%), followed by Black (23%), Latino (12%), and other (6%).
- The military branches that the participants served in were not reported.

LIMITATIONS

- The interviews were conducted two to six month after the children were born; therefore, the findings may be subject to memory bias.
- The military branches of the Service members were not reported, so caution must be taken to generalize the results to different military branches.
- Only one open-ended question was asked during the interview, so the lack of structured questioning may make it difficult to interpret the data.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Increase the sample size to better represent the military population
- Examine military spouses' experiences of giving birth alone with their husbands deployed
- Investigate any potential differences between Service members whose first child was born during deployment versus those whose second or third child was born during deployment

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design
★★☆
Appropriate
Research Plan and Sample

Methods
★★☆
Appropriate
Measurement and Analysis

Limitations
★★☆
Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
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