

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Marines

Exploring the Deployment and Reintegration Experiences of Active Duty Military Families with Young Children

Strong, J., & Lee, J. J. (2017). Exploring the deployment and reintegration experiences of active duty military families with young children. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*. doi:10.1080/10911359.2017.1339653

SUMMARY: Deployment and reintegration impact the way a military family functions, both with the temporary loss of a member and eventual readjustment upon return. This study examined the experience of the deployment cycle from the perspective of military spouses with young children. They found common themes for military families with young children in challenges encountered during deployment and reintegration, difficulty accessing resources, and coping strategies utilized to successfully navigate this time period.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Challenges encountered by families with young children during deployment include social isolation, managing significant life events and children's behaviors without Service members, communication with Service members, providing age-appropriate information to children, and making parenting decisions alone.
- Challenges encountered by families with young children during reintegration post-deployment include the non-deployed spouse having difficulty letting go of control, navigating co-parenting and parenting roles, and negotiating the Service member's household routine.
- Barriers to utilizing resources include lack of awareness of resources; resources only being offered on the military installation; lack of affordable, flexible childcare; and stigma associated with accessing resources.
- Strengths and coping strategies families with young children used during deployment include gaining social support, reaching out for help, staying busy, having a routine, leaving the house regularly, mapping the location of the Service member for children, and visiting family and friends.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Enhance current social service referral networks for military families to include non-military community resources
- Offer workshops on strategies for resilience during deployment and reintegration for military families with young children, emphasizing the importance of social networks, routine, and realistic expectations for all family members
- Offer home-based or online social and emotional support services for military families with young children experiencing deployment and reintegration in order to increase access

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Increase access to affordable, flexible childcare services when support events are held for military spouses
- Recommend partnerships between military-based and community-based programs to increase access to relevant social services for military families with young children, especially those that do not live on military installations
- Recommend the training of professionals who work with military families with young children to better identify and address challenges these families will experience during deployment and reintegration

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METHODS

- A mothers' group on a military installation was contacted and additional participants were recruited through the participants from the mothers' group.
- To recruit service providers, the authors contacted social service agencies on the military installation and distributed electronic flyers via email and social media.
- Both groups of participants engaged in a semi-structured interview in person or via telephone.
- Data were analyzed by establishing evaluation objectives and linking similar themes together.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 19 female spouses of Active Duty U.S. Marine Corps Service members (one of these interviews included the male Service member) and 10 professionals who provided social services to Active Duty families.
- All military spouse participants had at least one child under the age of five years old and had experienced a deployment in the past year or were currently experiencing one.
- No further demographic data was provided for the military participants, their children, or the service providers.

LIMITATIONS

- The small size of the sample and use of a convenience sample rather than a random or representative sample limits the generalizability of the results to the larger Active Duty military family population.
- The authors report the sample was not very diverse; given there was no demographic data provided, it is unclear how limited the diversity of the samples were and to which groups this study might be applied.
- The intent of the study was to explore the experiences of military families with young children, however the Service member was interviewed in only one of the families studied, so only the non-deployed spouses' experiences are examined. Service members may have different perspectives on challenges and coping through deployment and reintegration.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Repeat this study with a larger, representative sample, and provide demographic data
- Engage Service members in the interview process regarding the experience of families with young children during deployment and reintegration
- A longitudinal study with multiple interview times during the deployment cycle may provide a more complete picture of the various challenges encountered at different timepoints

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