

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Recurrent Headache in Military-Dependent Children and the Impact of Parent Deployment

Swedean, S. K., Gonzales, M. V., Zickefoose, B. A., Bush, A. C., Davis, J. M., Elrod, D. C., & Hsieh, D. T. (2013). Recurrent headache in military-dependent children and the impact of parent deployment. *Military Medicine*, 178(3), 274-278. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-12-00171

SUMMARY: Child and adolescent somatic complaints (physical symptoms that usually result from stress or emotional distress) are understudied in the parental deployment context. Survey data were used to examine the relation between recurrent headaches in children and adolescents and experiences with parental deployment. Results indicated that youth reported increased irrespective of whether a parent deployed or not, however age and gender was associated with headaches for youth who had a parent deploy.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Overall, 30% of children and adolescents included in this sample had recurrent headaches.
- Headaches had gotten worse (e.g. more frequent, severe) among 47% of children and adolescents with recurring headaches over the previous year, irrespective of parental deployment status (i.e. deployed/not deployed in last year).
- Among children and adolescents who had a deployed parent in the past 12 months, headaches were most frequent among young girls.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military parents on emotional and somatic complaints among military children, particularly surrounding deployment
- Offer workshops to military children and families that teach stress-management skills to promote well-being
- Develop specific programming for female military children as their somatic problems tend to be more severe than males

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend further investigation of the effects of parental deployment on child and adolescent somatic complaints to assist in the development of appropriate programming
- Recommend routine screening of military children's well-being to support early detection of problems and the provision of appropriate referrals for children that are struggling
- Publish materials regarding common psychological and physical issues children may experience when a parent is deployed

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METHODS

- The data source for this study was from parents whose child or adolescent was seen at Wilford Hall Medical Center and Brooke Army Medical Center for either acute or routine treatment.
- This study was a quantitative quasi-experiment comparing youth who did and did not have a parent deploy in the prior 12 months.
- The primary outcome in this study was recurrent headache frequency, severity, and duration (assessed via subjective self-report survey and not an established measure).

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 13,111 parents were asked to participate, 1,795 agreed to do so. Of participants, 548 reported recurrent headaches and were included in this study.
- Youth were between the ages of 5-17 years.
- Among included children and adolescents, 52% were female, 39% White, 18% Black, 21% Latino, and the remaining 22% were other ethnicities or unknown ethnicity.

LIMITATIONS

- Participating parents were recruited while seeking medical treatment for their child/adolescent for problems potentially related to somatic complaints; therefore, results may not be generalizable to all military children.
- Parents, not the child or adolescent patient, completed the surveys on recurrent headache problems; therefore, results may not accurately represent youth's actual experiences.
- The term "recurrent headache" was not defined for the participating parent; each parent used their own criteria by which to determine if their child had recurrent headaches which could influence the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a similar study with a more representative sample of military children and adolescents
- Examine other somatic complaints, such as stomach issues, skin problems, and fatigue that could affect children during parental deployment
- Explore whether gender of the deployed parent influences whether children and adolescents experience somatic health issues

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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