

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



**Focus:**  
Multiple  
Branches

## Combat-Related Parental Deployment: Identifying the Impact on Families With Preschool-age Children

Waliski, A., Bokony, P., & Kirchner, J. E. (2012). Combat-related parental deployment: Identifying the impact on families with preschool-age children. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 22(6), 653-670.  
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**SUMMARY:** There are few helpful resources and research studies on how military families with preschool-age children may be affected by deployment. Focus groups with military families that had at least one preschool-age child examined the emotions and reactions of family members to deployment. Different concerns arise for different family members and different phases of deployment, and caregiver distress may contribute to children's emotional and behavioral difficulties.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Families' concerns differed in each phase of deployment; pre-deployment was the most difficult time for spouses, while post-deployment was the most difficult for Service members.
- Service members and spouses had high levels of anxiety pre-deployment, but children were largely unaffected during this time period.
- The more anxious or distressed spouses felt during deployment, the more their children displayed emotional or behavioral problems (e.g., acting out, sleep problems, depression).
- Children tended to test parents' limits during post-deployment; all family members had to readjust to co-parenting and a return to greater at-home structure during this phase.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide peer support groups for spouses to discuss emotional and parenting challenges
- Educate military spouses about possible mental health difficulties during deployment and how these difficulties may impact parenting
- Disseminate resource information (e.g., childcare, medical, support information) for military families before the deployment cycle begins to avoid information overload pre-deployment

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that each military base have a central, easily-accessible office that can assist military families in finding and using compiled resource information for any type of concern
- Encourage professional education for childcare professionals about how to handle emotional and behavioral problems of children during parent deployment
- Support programs that assist military families with pre-deployment arrangements and plans (e.g., finances, childcare, legal issues)

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## METHODS

- Military families with a preschool-age child were recruited via word-of-mouth, email, handouts and flyers in a public elementary school's programs and at military installations.
- Service members and their spouses participated in focus groups asking about emotions and reactions of themselves and their family members to deployment.
- Two focus groups included Active Duty Air Force members and their spouses and two included Service members in any branch of the National Guard or Reserves and their spouses.
- Responses were coded and grouped by common themes.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included seven military families with a preschool-age child living in Arkansas.
- All Service members were fathers and primary caregivers were mothers; four of the fathers were deployed and unable to participate in the study.
- All families had experienced two or more OEF/OIF deployments, and six of the families had more than one child.
- No additional demographic information was provided.

## LIMITATIONS

- The small sample of families that all lived in the same state may not generalize to other military families with preschool-age children.
- The ages and number of other children in a military family may also influence results.
- Service members and spouses were interviewed together, possibly reducing openness or honest responding among participants.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct studies to examine what types of resources may be most beneficial for military families with preschool-age children specifically
- Examine whether older siblings assist preschool-age children in managing a parent deployment
- Investigate how parenting of preschool-age children changes during parental deployment

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:  
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>