

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Fathering After Military Deployment: Parenting Challenges and Goals of Fathers of Young Children

Walsh, T. B., Dayton, C. J., Erwin, M. S., Muzik, M., Busuito, A., & Rosenblum, K. L. (2014). Fathering after military deployment: Parenting challenges and goals of fathers of young children. *Health & Social Work, 39*(1), 35-44.
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SUMMARY: The parenting experiences of military fathers of young children, ages one to seven, during reintegration were examined. Fathers articulated both motivations to be a better parent, as well as challenges related to reintegrating into family life. For those fathers who also had posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), parenting young children presented unique challenges related to triggering symptoms.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Two primary themes emerged from Service members' interviews about fathering after deployment: (a) they have motivation to re-engage in their children's lives, and (b) they face challenges related to their parenting efforts.
- Fathers described the challenges related to parenting young children as issues regarding reconnecting, feeling guilty or remorseful for missing developmental milestones, and readjusting to the "father" and "co-parent" roles.
- Fathers expressed motivation to improve their parenting in the areas of using positive parenting skills, expressing affection, managing their temper and stress, and connecting with other fathers.
- PTSD was uniquely associated with parenting stress, especially caring for young children; for instance, young children's crying may act as a trigger of PTSD symptoms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate Veterans with PTSD about specific strategies for parenting young children and possible child-rearing-related PTSD triggers
- Offer support groups for Service members and families that discuss unique parenting challenges faced during reunification and encourage military parents and couples to support one another during reintegration
- Provide Veterans who are struggling with parenting guilt, stress, and role readjustment post-deployment with referrals to mental health providers and support groups

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend flexible schedules for recently deployed Service members to allow parents to attend important events and spend quality time with their children to foster reconnection
- Support the development and implementation of age-specific parenting curriculum for Service member parents who are reintegrating into their families after deployment
- Encourage education of professionals working with military families regarding the difficulties parents may face during reintegration

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METHODS

- Participants were selected from the larger STRONG (Support to Restore, Repair, Nurture, and Grow) Military Families study.
- Participants completed in-home interviews about experiences with parenting after returning from deployment and questionnaires about demographic information and mental health.
- Interview answers were analyzed for parenting and reintegration themes, and associations between Service member mental health and parenting or reintegration issues were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 14 Service member fathers, ages 22-40 years, who had been deployed within the past two years and had at least one young child (i.e., under age seven).
- The sample was predominantly White (83%), followed by Latino (8%), or another race/ethnicity (8%).
- Most Service members were married (75%), and some were engaged (17%) or divorced (8%); the majority had either one (33%) or two (42%) children, while one Service member each had three, four, and five children.

LIMITATIONS

- The small number of participants limits generalizability of findings.
- Only fathers were assessed, not allowing for an examination of gender differences between military mothers and military fathers.
- Other unmeasured variables (e.g., number of parent deployments, pre-deployment mental health) may have influenced the findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine parenting during reintegration among both military mothers and fathers of young children to learn about their experiences and any differences between genders
- Conduct a similar study with a larger, more diverse sample of participants, including more racial/ethnic diversity and Service members from all branches of the military
- Explore how child age may impact the experience of reintegrating parents and whether reintegration issues differ for parents of preschool children, gradeschool children, and adolescents

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