

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Military Fathers' Perspectives on Involvement

Willerton, E., Schwarz, R. L., MacDermid Wadsworth, S. M., & Oglesby, M. S. (2011). Military fathers' perspectives on involvement *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25(4), 521-530. doi:10.1037/a0024511521

SUMMARY: A description of military fathers' perspectives on involvement with their children is provided. Results around father involvement are presented using three overlapping major domains of functioning: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. While fathers' described many different types of involvement, one central theme was how much involvement with children was a major concern for them, despite or perhaps because of the challenges of military careers.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Within each of the three domains, cognitive, affective, and behavioral, fathers' talked about involvement and how the deployment cycle affected, albeit in different ways, their involvement.
- Fathers' cognitions about not being able to be there underlay how they monitor, regulate, and direct their fathering. For example some would leave most of the child-rearing duties to their partner so as not to disrupt the order of the household.
- Fathers expressed complex emotions about their relationships with their children in light of the demands of their military jobs. For example fathers' expressed some guilt and desire not to alienate their children when they returned from a deployment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Support the development of a technology platform (e.g., online modules, app, website) to disseminate child and youth development information to Service members and their partners
- Develop online modules that focus on effective parenting practices that Service members and their families can use in raising their children at different stages of development
- Help fathers and children anticipate and develop skills to maintain emotional closeness even when fathers are physically not present

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend awareness campaigns on the importance of child and youth development for military families and their children
- Continue efforts to support on-line communication between deployed Service members and their families
- Develop incentive plans for fathers to participate in on-line parent education programs

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through fliers, assemblies, and broadcast media.
- Data were gathered via focus groups conducted with 71 fathers at 14 U.S. military installations.
- Data analysis included three members of the research team independently reading each transcript, discussing divergent coding, and establishing consensus on common themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were fathers who had returned from deployment within the past 6 months.
- Most participants identified as White (n = 39), and 13 as Black, 10 as Latino, and 9 as other. Most fathers were between 25 and 29 (n = 20) and 30-34 (n = 21) years of age.
- On average, participants had more than one child in the household. Their children ranged in age from 5 months to 28 years as follows: infants (n = 35), preschool children (n = 23), school-age children (n = 34), adolescents (n = 18), and adults (n = 4).

LIMITATIONS

- While the questions in the focus group protocol were broad and open-ended, it is possible that important topics were omitted or that not all fathers expressed their opinion.
- With the focus group method there is the potential for social desirability effects.
- Fathers who volunteered to participate may have been more committed to fathering than those who did not, which could have biased the outcomes of the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore fathers descriptions of involvement from a variety of different military contexts and ranks
- Evaluate the effectiveness of on-line parenting resources for military fathers in terms of access, usage, and utility
- Investigate further the effects of parent-child relationship among families where one spouse is deployed

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