

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
National
Guard

Do Family Communication Patterns Buffer Children from Difficulties Associated with a Parent's Military Deployment? Examining Deployed and At-Home Parents' Perspectives

Wilson, S. R., Chernichky, S. M., Wilkum, K., & Owlett, J. S. (2014). Do family communication patterns buffer children from difficulties associated with a parent's military deployment? Examining deployed and at-home parents' perspectives. *Journal of Family Communication*, 14(1), 32-52. doi:10.1080/15267431.2013.857325

SUMMARY: Family interaction styles may impact the way that families and family members overcome difficulties. The association between parent reports of family communication and perceptions of child well-being during deployment and reunion was explored among previously-deployed National Guard parents and their spouses or partners. Children in families with National Guard parents who encouraged open communication had fewer overall difficulties and more prosocial behavior compared to children who had less open communication.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Deployed parents with more open family communication reported that their child had fewer overall difficulties and more pro-social behavior in comparison to deployed parents who described less open communication, even after controlling for demographic and military variables (e.g., number of deployments).
- At-home parents' reports of communication were not associated with their reports of children's difficulties or pro-social behavior.
- The majority of parents in the study reported a "consensual" family interaction type where parents listen to children's ideas but ultimately make family decisions themselves.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops on facilitating open communication among families with recently returned Service members
- Educate families about the positive benefits of open family communication for child functioning
- Provide resources for learning and teaching open communication to military families (e.g., handouts, online modules)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support reintegration programs focused on helping youth and families communicate their individual experiences post-deployment
- Recommend education for professionals working with military families about how to facilitate open communication among families
- Promote the use of open family communication styles in existing programs for military families

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited at yellow-ribbon reintegration events from 2009 to 2013; parents were eligible if they brought one or more of their children, ages 3-17 years, to a child resiliency program 30-90 days after deployment.
- Parents completed measures of family communication and child functioning in relation to the military parent's deployment.
- The association between parent reports of family communication and perceptions of child well-being during deployment and reunion was explored.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included previously-deployed National Guard parents (n = 102) and at-home spouses or partners of previously-deployed National Guard parents (n = 110); 56 of the participants were in the same family.
- Service member parents were primarily male (88%), while at-home parents were primarily female (92%).
- Most families had two-parent households (67%), with parents who worked full time (66%) and had at least some college education (66%).
- Families' Service members were primarily enlisted (79%), had experienced one (48%) or two (29%) deployments, and had been deployed to Iraq (46%), Afghanistan (19%), or Bosnia (8%).

LIMITATIONS

- Participants were all in National Guard families and involved in reintegration events, and results may not generalize beyond this population.
- Family communication was reported retrospectively, which may have introduced recall bias.
- The study was cross-sectional and conclusions cannot be drawn regarding a causal relationship between family communication and child reintegration adjustment.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore which specific communicative behaviors are associated with open communication that may help deployed parents re-establish a connection with their children during reintegration
- Examine differences in at-home and deployed parents' reports of family communication and child difficulties
- Investigate family communication and child adjustment during Service member reintegration among different types of families (e.g., Active Duty, different branches, those not attending reintegration events)

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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