

Residential Relocation among Adolescents in Military Families

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Abstract: *The effects of the Military deployment of one or both parents on children and Families need to be understood in the context of Military culture as well as from developmental risk for maladjustment. Although research addressing such effects is very limited in both scope and certainty, but one can identify several key factors that relate to psychological risk, adjustment, and outcome. Most Military children have been resilient to the effects of deployment of at least one of their parents, but children with pre-existing psychological conditions, such as anxiety and depression have been particularly vulnerable, as well as children with specific risk factors, such as child abuse. There has been urgent needs to better understand the impact of deployment on military children and families and to provide appropriate support for them, there is a dearth of research. Programs and interventions do exist, but definitive conclusions about what really works are by and large lacking. Programs that try to assist military children and families often focus only on the prevention or reduction of problems.*

Keywords: Adolescents, Military Families and Residential Relocation

1. Introduction

A common saying in the military is that when one person joins, the whole family serves. Military families may often be in the background of public discourse on the military, but they are critical to its success. Although aspects of military life can be very difficult for families, positive family functioning boosts a service member's morale, retention, and ability to carry out missions (Shinseki, 2003).

2. The effects of the Military Deployment

According to a report, service members reported positive family relationships as a source of resilience and problems at home as a source of stress and interference (Mental Health Advisory Team 6, 2009). Any efforts to build a strong, effective, and sustainable military force must also consider military families, improving the relationships of the soldier with his or her family members and strengthening the family itself (cf. Gottman, Gottman, & Atkins, 2011). Terror, Military Children and Families have faced multiple tests associated with unprecedented lengthy and multiple deployments; shorter stays at home between deployments; and greater risks of death, injury, and psychological problems among service members. Although many Military Children and Families rise to the occasion and do well (Wiens & Boss, 2006), these challenges can take a toll on their health and well-being (Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, Jaycox, & Scott, 2008; Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009). One of the best ways to prevent or solve problems is to identify what goes well and to use this as the basis of intervention (Park, 2004, 2009; Park & Peterson, 2008; Park, Peterson, & Brunwasser, 2009; Peterson & Park, 2003). Military life presents both challenges and opportunities to grow for children and families (Hall, 2008). To provide effective services for Military children and families, there is need for better understanding of these challenges and strengths framed in terms of the culture and function of the military during peace and during war.

3. During Peace Time

In peaceful times, Military Children and Families face recurrent separations, frequent and often sudden moves, difficult reunions, long and often unpredictable duty hours, and the threat of injury or death of the military service member during routine training and peaceful missions (Black, 1993). On average, active duty Military Families move every two to three years within the United States or overseas (Croan, Levine, & Blankinship, 1992). Secondary school-age students move three times more often than their civilian counterparts do (Shinseki, 2003).

4. During War Time

The major challenge for Military Children and Families during the time of war, as the time of lengthy deployment of the uniformed family member to a combat zone. Children not only miss the deployed parent, but they also experience obvious uncertainty. serve families, families with children who have disabilities, families with pregnancies, single-parent families, and families with mothers in the Military (American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force, 2007). Although Military deployment poses risks, especially for some families, it is equally important to remember that many Military Children and families show resilience and growth. During the deployment of a family member, parents report that their children are closer to family and friends, and that they are more responsible, independent, and proud. Seventy-four percent of the spouses of service members report personal growth, despite also reporting increased loneliness, stress, and anxiety (U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, 2009b). Resilience plays an important role in all phases of deployment. Resilience mitigates stress and improves adjustment to deployment by children and families. Families that function most effectively are active, optimistic, selfreliant, and flexible (Jensen & Shaw, 1996; Wiens & Boss, 2006).

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5. Effects on Families

Military Families that function well find meaning in military life and identify with the work of their uniformed family member (Hammer, Cullen, Marchand, & Dezsofi, 2006; Marchant & Medway, 1987). Family preparedness for deployment as well as community and social support lead to better adjustment (Wiens & Boss, 2006). Huebner (2010) found that adolescents who adapted well during parental deployment showed the ability to put the situation in perspective; positive reframing; the embracing of change and adaptation as necessary; effective coping skills; and good relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. For example, one adolescent reported, "I have really good neighbors that understand the situation going on. And I'm always welcome at my neighbors" (Huebner, 2010, p. 14).

6. Factors Associated with Children and Family Vulnerability

There are several factors which moderate or increase the vulnerability in children to psychological maladjustment. Children of military families are also no less vulnerable to such factors. Across research studies, parental deployment has been linked to several deleterious youth outcomes, including depression (e.g., Jensen, Martin, & Watanabe, 1996), emotional dysregulation (Rosen, Teitelbaum, & Westhuis, 1993), behavioral problems (Levai, Kaplan, Ackerman, & Hammock, 1995), and poor academic performance (Hiew, 1992). Moreover, boys appear to suffer more effects of family disruption than girls (Jensen et al., 1996). It is therefore important to clinically assess for such risk factors as well as those that may be more unique or extreme in the families of military personnel. Most of what children and adolescents experience and comprehend is based on their developmental level or mental age. Thus, children of different ages are likely to manifest different understanding of and response to separation from a military parent. Much of the distress experienced by infants and young children is influenced by that of their parent or other caregivers (Murray, 2002). In response to caregiver sadness and anxiety, an infant may react by becoming more irritable and unresponsive, vulnerable to sleep disruptions, eating problems, and increased periods of crying. Preschool children may respond to separation and stress associated with separation from a military parent by regressing to behaviors that they have previously outgrown. For example, young children may become more aggressive and demanding, cry for attention, and demonstrate an increase in bedwetting. School-aged children are often aware of the threats associated with war and the potential impact on a loved one's safety. In addition to emotional dysregulation, worry, and sleep difficulties, children at this age are prone to poor attention spans and subsequent difficulties in school (Murray, 2002; Pincus et al., 2005). Adolescents may become angry and aloof, act out, or lose interest in their usual activities (Stafford & Grady, 2003). In general, research on the mental health of children and adolescents related to parental deployment indicates that the experience is clearly stressful. Research conducted with military families also demonstrates the important influence of the mental health of the at-home parent (usually mothers) in

determining child adjustment (e.g., Jensen et al., 1996). In particular, positive relationships with parents (Hagan, MacMillan, & Wheton, 1996) and better overall family adjustment (Kelly, 1994) are associated with the psychological well-being of military children. A growing body of research suggests that military deployment is associated with increased rates of domestic violence and child maltreatment both during the deployment and upon return of the service member compared to the pre deployment period (e.g., Clark & Messer, 2006; Gibbs, Martin, Kupper, & Johnson, 2007). The findings indicated that both departures to and returns from operational deployment stress military families and likely increase the rate of child maltreatment.

Multiple factors converge to increase the behavioral risks and psychological vulnerability in children of military parents who are either deployed or reintegrating with their families following deployment. Such risks and vulnerabilities increase as a function of whether the deployment was combat-related, resulted in extended separation, and/or resulted in psychological or physical injury or death of the soldier-parent. Much less is known about protective factors that increase resiliency to risk exposure in other children and families. In closing, we offer a series of empirically informed recommendations for identifying and treating such military families and their children.

7. Effects on School Mobility

When children change their school, they experience an ecological transition. Ecological transitions are changes in the settings, roles, or expectations of a developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). School mobility is believed to be a risk factor for low-income children because it introduces discontinuity in learning environments that can adversely affect learning, especially if frequent or if it occurs during children's formative school years. Mobility may disrupt children's instructional environments because the subject-matter curriculum is not uniform from school to school, and school climate also may differ across settings. Moreover, school mobility may disrupt children's relationships with peers and teachers, and reduce the stability and predictability of established patterns of activities so important for optimal adjustment (Cole & Cole, 1993). These impacts are exacerbated in high poverty, low-resource settings often found in central cities (Wilson, 1987). Early childhood programs are designed, in part, to promote stability and predictability in children's learning environments (Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Wachs & Gruen, 1982). Recent studies have documented the negative association between school mobility and academic performance (GAO, 1994; Mehana, 1997; Wood et al., 1993). Using nationally-representative data from the U.S. Department of Education's Prospects Study and controlling for family income, the GAO report reveals that students who have attended three or more schools since entering first grade are much more likely by third grade to have low reading tests cores and are more likely to have repeated a grade. Using data from the National Health Insurance Survey and using more control than in the GAO study, Wood et al. (1993) in a study found that students who have experienced high numbers of moves are more

likely to have repeated a grade. Other researchers have recently examined the relationship between school mobility, residential mobility, and academic achievement and high school dropout. Astone and McClenaghan (1994) used data from High School and Beyond to show that frequent residential mobility is associated with a greater probability of school dropout, after controlling for a number of family and demographic factors. Rumberger and Larson (1998) and Swanson and Schneider (1999) in another study used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study to examine the relationship between school mobility and high school dropout. Both of those studies focus primarily on the effects of school moves that take place in high school.

8. Conclusions

It is Important to address problems, and to recognize the strengths and assets of military children and families and to promote and bolster them. A full and accurate picture of military children and families is required upon which to base interventions. More generally, the research literature on Military Children and Families is too less, especially in light of contemporary concerns with their well-being. There is a significant shortage of evidence-based programs. Indeed, many programs for Military Children and Families have not been evaluated at all. In the absence of evidence for their effectiveness, they are but well-intended interventions. When resources are limited and demands are great, it is even more critical to identify programs that are effective and efficient, and to understand the active ingredients that make programs successful (Lester, McBride, Bliese, & Adler, 2011).

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