The Psychosocial Effects of Deployment on Military Children


101 Army parents with deployed spouses reported on the psychosocial functioning of their elementary school aged children using standardized psychosocial health and stress measures. The results were compared to a national sample, and used to identify potential predictors of those children at “high risk” for psychosocial morbidity during wartime deployment of a parent. Analysis of parent reports suggests that children with a deployed parent had significantly higher levels of psychosocial difficulties, and that caregiving parents had more parenting stress and overall life stress than a comparable national sample.

Key Findings:

- Per parental report, children with a deployed parent had significantly higher levels of physical, emotional, and psychosocial difficulties than a national sample.
- Higher levels of parenting stress predicted poorer psychosocial functioning among children.
- The 33 (out of 101) children identified as high risk in this sample were more likely to have parents who perceived poor military or community support, had less education, and were young spouses of enlisted Service members.

Implications for Programs:

- Programs can continue to offer curriculum aimed at assisting spouses of deployed Service members with managing stresses during deployment; such programs may help minimize difficulties for both spouses and children during deployment.
- Programs may offer specific modules on managing parenting stress during deployment; parents may be given information on the usefulness of self-care activities, peer support, informal networks of support, and physical exercise.

Implications for Policies:

- Policy may recommend extending resources to at-home parents to help them with the stressors associated with single parenting during the Service member’s absence; for example, parents may be offered child-care opportunities in the evening when the parent needs to attend to household chores or self-care activities.
- Policy may encourage regular communication and collaboration between at-home parents and school personnel, especially during deployments. Funding staff positions (who are housed in the school districts) could be helpful in supporting school-parent-military collaboration in support of the military child’s wellbeing.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Longitudinal data is needed to determine if parenting stress during deployment(s) has long-term effects on child psychosocial functioning.
- Additional research may help determine whether families of non-deployed Service members report similar stress as families of deployed Service members.
- Future research might include a wider age range of children, additional locations, and differences in military rank and service branch.
Background Information

Methodology:
- Spouses of deployed Army members with a child between 5 and 12 years of age were recruited through a large military installation in the northwest U.S.
- Parent self-report surveys were used to assess child psychosocial functioning (Pediatric Symptom Checklist), parent stress (Parenting Stress Index-Short Form), overall life stress (Perceived Stress Scale), and demographic variables.
- Parent reports were compared to national standardized norms. Linear regressions were conducted to determine the factors that predicted psychosocial morbidity in children and families.

Participants:
- 101 parents with a deployed Army spouse (86% Female; 65% White, 13% Hispanic, 9% Asian, 9% Black, 4% other)
- Children ranged in age from 5 to 12 years (Mean = 8.6, SD = 2.2); No data reported on parent age.
- 23% officers, 77% enlisted; 67% deployed within last 6 months, 33% deployed within last 15 months.

Limitations:
- As cross-sectional data were used, the direction of effects cannot be established; it may be that having a child with more difficulties results in more stress for parents.
- Measures of psychosocial difficulties in children were reported by parents, not measured clinically; parental stress levels may interfere with their perceptions of a child’s distress.
- This was a self-selected, convenience sample in one location. Participants may differ from non-participants in important ways that were not assessed.

Assessing Research that Works

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☐ Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications

Overall Quality Rating: ★★★☆☆