

## **Children on the Home Front: An Exploration of the Effects Deployment has on Military Children**

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### **Abstract**

Every year, thousands of military personnel get deployed overseas. Over the past few decades, more awareness has been made on the psychological effects that deployment has on these individuals. However, little research has been done on the effects that this separation has on the children that they are leaving behind. Deployment does not just affect the service member; it affects the family as well. This study seeks to gain an idea of how deployment affects the children of military personnel that have been deployed at least once during the course of the children's lifetimes. To do this, a questionnaire was designed for both the children and their non-deployed caregiver. This questionnaire was used to assess the child's feelings, his or her coping mechanisms, his or her reactions to the deployment, changes in mood or behavior during the deployment, and much more. The child was then asked to describe this period of his or her life. Through these interviews, several common themes were noted and it can be seen that deployment has an overall negative effect on these children. Older children, who have a better understanding of the situation, seem to handle the deployment much better than younger ones. However, all of the children described this period as one of the worst part of their lives and look back on it with sullen feelings. This study provides a baseline for further research on how deployment affects children and how we can better aid them through this time in their lives.

**Keywords: Deployment, Military Dependent, Children**

### **1. Introduction**

In 2012, the total number of military personnel in the United States was recorded at 3.6 million. Of these military members, 43.6% have at least one child and this percentage accounts for 1,946,456 dependent children in the United States (United States of America Department of Defense, 2012). In their lifetime, these military children will endure multiple separations from their parent, ranging from a few days to several months. Many studies have shown that these multiple separations can have several effects on a child's wellbeing (Aranda, Middleton, Flake, & Davis, 2011; Barker & Berry, 2009; Cederbaum, et al., 2014; Creech, Hadley, & Borsari, 2014; Jensen, Martin, & Watanabe, 1996; Millegan, Engel, Liu, & Dinneen, 2013; Paris, DeVoe, Ross, & Acker, 2010). In a study done by Luo, Wang, and Gao (2011), children who had experienced the absence of a father figure were more likely to have an increased state of anxiety and lower self-esteem. This study was done on children whose fathers had just left for jobs in a rural area of China. Children of military personnel experience this same separation but also have an added component of the danger experienced by their parents during wartime. This makes military separation unique and gives reason to look into how this separation affects children.

Military deployment may in fact provoke a wide range of psychological symptoms in dependent children. Children of military personnel have been found to exhibit higher levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Some of

these symptoms include an increased risk of showing depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, anxiety, behavioral problems, attention-related issues, clinginess, school-related problems, and emotional problems (Aranda, Middleton, Flake, & Davis, 2011; Barker & Berry, 2009; Cederbaum, et al., 2014; Chandra, et al., 2010; Chartrand, Frank, White, & Shope, 2008; Creech, Hadley, & Borsari, 2014; Jensen, Martin, & Watanabe, 1996; Kelley, 1994).

These externalizing and internalizing symptoms may be due to the way a child experiences the deployment. A study done by Ryan-Wenger (2001) examined how children perceive war. When the children were asked about their perceptions of war, the active duty military dependents were more likely to answer that they were sad and afraid as opposed to reserve and civilian children who expressed a moral outrage. When asked what they thought would happen to their family if there was a war, the active duty dependents were more likely to believe that their parent would go to war and die. These fears about the war could potentially impact a child's psychological well-being.

Millegan, Engal, Liu, and Dinneen (2013) have also found that psychiatric hospitalization for military dependent children has a 10% increase for children between the ages of nine and seventeen when a parent had been recently deployed and the odds of hospitalization increased with the amount of time the parent and child were separated. When a parent goes to war, their children lose valuable time spent with their parent. They must go through the stressors that are associated with deployment and are subjected to the long period of deployment. Young children may have an especially hard time with deployment due to the fact that they are unable to develop a healthy attachment to their deployed parent. This makes them susceptible to a range of psychological symptoms. It has also been found that the deployment cycle can cause changes in the attachment pattern of children of any age and this change in pattern can progress into intense emotional and behavioral problems (Paris, DeVoe, Ross, & Acker, 2010).

The time a member of the military spends away from home can also effect how their children react. Longer deployments and separations can cause more damage to the parent-child relationship. Shorter tours can also have negative effects on the parent-child relationship depending on the amount of communication during the separation. Weaker communication can cause negative effects on the relationship (Lowe, Adams, Browne, & Hinkle, 2012). This is important to note because during many wartime deployments, communication is limited at times causing serious effects on familial relationships. A strong familial relationship is vital during deployment time. The effects of parent-parent relationship can also cause harm to a child's psychological well-being. If a mother has a hard time coping with their spouses deployment and exhibits depressive symptoms then the child is more likely to exhibit these symptoms as well (Kelley, Finkel, & Ashby, 2003).

The purpose of this study is to do a qualitative analysis of how deployment effects military dependent children. This study will gather more information on how deployment takes a toll on a child's psychological well-being. Children and parents will be asked a series of questions to assess their deployment experience. Common themes that are expected to arise through these questions include: anxiety, depressive symptoms, added stressors, and negative perceptions of war in the children of military personnel.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Participants**

Participants included the children of military personnel who had been previously deployed at least once during the child's lifetime, as well as the primary caregivers during the time of deployment. Children were only eligible if they were old enough to remember specific details about the deployment. The children must have been between the ages of seven and eighteen years-old. There were a total of eleven children and six caregivers interviewed. In all cases, the spouse of the military member was the primary caregiver at the time of deployment. The actual military member was not included in the study. Participants were obtained by contacting armories in the Western North Carolina area.

### **2.2. Materials**

Separate child and parent questionnaires were designed specifically for this study. The child questionnaire consisted of 25 questions designed to assess the time and place of deployment, the child's feelings during the deployment stages, how the child coped with their feelings, and how the child describes this period of their life. The parent survey consisted of 23 questions designed to obtain results about the child from a parent's point of view. Items on the questionnaire asked about how the child(ren) reacted to the news about deployment, how they acted during the deployment stages, and how their child(ren) changed during this period of time.

### 2.3. Procedure

Consent and assent were gained first before beginning the interviews. Two consent forms and one assent form were used in order to gain permission to interview the participants. The parent was asked to consent to answering the parent questionnaire and to also give assent to allow for their child(ren) to be interviewed. The children were also asked to give consent in order to gain permission for them to participate in the child interview.

When consent and assent were gained, the interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted in a setting of the parent's choosing, with most parents choosing their own home. During the interviews, answers to each question were written down and were also audio recorded. These audio recordings were used later to write down answers in more detail. To ensure that the children's answers were not altered by their parents' views of the deployment, the children were interviewed first. Each child was asked a series of 25 questions. They were allowed to skip or choose not to answer certain questions, but all of the participants opted to answer every question in the order given.

After each child in the family completed their questionnaire, the care-giving parent was interviewed. The parents were asked a series of 23 questions. They were allowed to skip or choose not to answer certain question, but all of the participants opted to answer every question in the order given.

Following all of the interviews, the written and audio answers were analyzed to find common themes within each question. In order to gain an idea of how different parents and children view the deployment from the child's perspective, answers were analyzed in separate child and parent sections

## 3. Results

The answers of the child and parent questionnaires were analyzed to find common themes amongst the majority of the children. These themes will be discussed individually and will be separated by child and parent answers. In some cases, these themes do not account for the views of every child or parent, only the views of most of the children or parents.

### 3.1. Child

#### 3.1.1 *why did your parent have to leave?*

Most of the older children seemed to have an understanding of what deployment was. They most commonly answered that their parent wanted to serve his country. However, the younger children most commonly answered that it was simply because he was in the Army or that they had no idea why he had to leave. One child stated that, "the Army made him go" (Brooks, 2014). This misunderstanding of war may account for some of the sullen feelings during deployment.

#### 3.1.2 *what happens overseas?*

Most of the children had a negative answer to this particular question. Due to the things that they see on TV and difficult circumstances during communications with their parent overseas (such as, hearing sirens in the background and suddenly being cut off) children were more likely to have a negative view of their father's life overseas. When asked this question some children just simply gave the one word answer, "war." Other children went into depth about war. One child stated, "people fight and kill each other" (Brooks, 2014). This negative view of life overseas may account for added stress and worrying for the dependents back home.

#### 3.1.3 *did you think your parent was safe?*

Older children were more likely to answer that their parent was safe. Most of their parents were older and had desk jobs. The children understood that their parents weren't on the frontlines and since they were older and more developed, they knew that everything being played on TV isn't what is happening all they time. They were also more aware of the safety precautions and more aware of the reasoning for why their parent couldn't call home every day.

On the other hand, younger children were more likely to answer that they didn't think their parent was safe. They often lacked an understanding of why their parent was gone and why they couldn't talk to him every day.

### *3.1.4 did you worry about your parent a lot?*

Whether or not the child believed their parent was safe and no matter how much information they were given about deployment, every child answered that they worried about the parent quite frequently. Even if their parent had a desk job, they're still in a place filled with war and violence. This worry would often contribute to added stress on these children's lives. Most children stated that they worried about their parent many times throughout the day. Even when they were participating in activities at school, sports, clubs, etc, they still had their parent on their mind. This often attributed to the children being sad and lonely. When asked if they ever cried during the deployment, most of the children answered "yes."

### *3.1.5 what kinds of feelings did you have during your parent's deployment?*

When asked this particular question, all of the children responded with negative answers. The children answered that they had feeling such as, concerned, depressed, sad, scared, stressed, and lonely. One child responded, "It was really stressful because it's like you see all these things on TV and... what goes on over there and then he goes over and it's just like I don't know what's going to happen to him" (Long, 2014). Due to popular media and news coverage, children are exposed to the violence of war every day and this can cause significant stress for children who cannot truly understand what their parent is doing overseas.

### *3.1.6 how was life different at home during your parent's deployment?*

This question yielded many different answers but the common theme among most of the children was that their mother had no help so they had to step up and take on more responsibility. Children of military personnel are often forced to grow up faster because of a deployment. Suddenly they're placed in a situation where the remaining caregiver has no help and they now must help take over the deployed parent's place. Many of the older children were given more chores and responsibility for helping to take care of their younger siblings. One particular boy stated, "You'll become the man of the house" (Lewczyk, 2014). In fact, many of the older boys reported that they had to become the man of the house. This sometimes caused resentment in the younger children. They did not want their older brother to act as if he was in charge of them. During the interviews, when the older one stated that they became the man of the house, the younger would often shake their head and say 'no you weren't' in the background. However, this older sibling often believed that they needed to act as a father figure in order to comfort their younger siblings. Perhaps one of the most disheartening answers to this question was, "I didn't have anyone to look up to" (Lewczyk, 2014). Other answers to this question include things such as "dad wasn't there" or "we didn't do as many fun things." Several of the children also stated that they had to stay with their grandparents a lot. They talked about how when their stay-at-home caregiver was busy, they often had to stay with other family members instead of the comfort of their own homes.

### *3.1.7 how has deployment changed you?*

Deployment can have several effects on children. It can often produce negative effects such as depression or anxiety. However, children will tend to give a more broad answer to this question. The most common answer to this question was that the child was always afraid that he would have to leave again. This shows that sometimes the effects of deployment can persist for a significant time after the parent returns home. These children often have to live with the constant fear of losing their parent for another year or possibly for a lifetime if things go wrong.

## *3.2. Parent*

### *3.2.1 how did your child(ren) react upon hearing the news of deployment?*

As expected, many parents reported that their child was very upset and sad. They shed a lot of tears and became very clingy with their military parent. However, another theme appeared with this question. Some parents reported that their child became angry. One parent talked about how her child was angry because the father had volunteered to go and her child didn't understand why their father would volunteer to leave his family. The child eventually gained an

understanding of why he wanted to serve his country but it took a long time for this particular child to be okay with the situation. Other children became angry with their deploying parent and some even became angry with the Army. These children often failed to report these feelings of anger in the child questionnaire; they mostly just the sadness that they felt. They displayed how anger and sadness can sometimes run together. Parent who reported that their child was angry also reported that they tried to avoid the deployment situation. One parents said, "My son got more distant. He wasn't around as much, even the night before his dad left he went and stayed with a friend, so I'm not sure if he wasn't just trying to avoid the whole situation" (Miller, 2014).

### *3.2.2 did your child(ren) act out more during the deployment?*

In most cases, the parent responded that their child(ren) acted out a lot more than they had when their father was home. This may be due to the fact that most of the fathers were stricter than the mothers and the children thought that since dad was gone they could get away with more. One parent reported that her son put her to the test. The children of these parents were also more likely to state that their siblings acted out or got in trouble more often than they did when their father was home. One child stated that her brother used the opportunity of their father being absent to get a tattoo that their father had strictly prohibited when he was home. Although the children seemed to be more disobedient during deployment, most of the parents reported that these behavioral problems disappeared after the father returned home. However, a couple parents reported that their child greeted the deployed parent with resentment. They had a kind of "who are you to tell me what to do?" attitude. Their parent had been gone for so long and they had the chance to be in charge. They didn't want to give up their power or independence. One parent reported that the frequent deployments may have contributed to her child's Oppositional Defiance Disorder. The constant leaving and returning put a stain on the parent-child relationship and it cause the child to act out more and resent her father's absence.

### *3.2.3 did you child(ren) express any concerns for their deployed parent's safety?*

The answers to this particular question mimicked the answers to the item on the child questionnaire, "Did you think your parent was safe?" Parents of older children responded that their child didn't really express any concern for their father's safety. Parents of younger children were more likely to respond that their child often expressed concern for their father's safety during the deployment. This concern resulted even though parents reported that they had talked about the deployment frequently and they thought their child seemed to have an understanding of what deployment was. This concern may be due to misinformation. Even though the parents thought that their child knew what was going on, they still relied on information from the TV or either they just didn't understand what their parent was telling them. This calls for more help in the military communities. Children need resources to help them understand where their parent is, what they're doing, and they need to be given a broad description of what happens overseas.

### *3.2.4 how does your child describe this period of their life?*

Although most children were proud of their father for serving our country, most parents reported that the child looks back on this experience with sullen faces. Common answers included, "it was a sad time", "they won't talk about it", and "they say it was the worst year of their life." Deployment isn't easy for any child. It often results in negative effects and feelings. These children don't look back at deployment as a happy time. These children look at deployment as one of their worst memories.

## **4. Discussion**

This study provides qualitative results on the way children experience deployment. Deployment doesn't just affect the soldier. It affects everyone in the family. From the responses to each questionnaire, it is clear that most children take deployment pretty hard. They view deployment as one of the worst parts of their lives. These negative feelings can lead to a range of psychological problems. As stated before, these feelings can lead to depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, anxiety, behavioral problems, attention-related issues, clinginess, school-related problems, and emotional problems. This calls for added attention on these specific children. Children who are required to go through a parental deployment need extra support and this study notifies others of the need for continued intervention and further research on the subject matter.

## 5. Conclusion

This study provides important information on how military children cope with the deployment of a parent and how deployment causes a number of challenges to arise in a child's life. Although the study presented results consistent with previous research, it did have some limitations. First, there was a very small sample size and all of the parents were in the same branch of the military. All deployed fathers were in the Army National Guard. This may account for some of the loneliness felt by the children due to the fact that most National Guard families do not live near a military base that offers support systems for military families. These children may have had an easier time coping with deployment had they been around other children who had the same deployment experience.

The children in this study experienced deployment several months or years prior to the interviews. This may have been another limitation. This study showed the long term effects of deployment can have on children. However, more research could be done with children who are experiencing deployment currently during the interview period.

This study highlights several emotional and behavioral difficulties that children experience during deployment. These challenges throughout deployment may call for assistance in addressing these children's needs. In response to these results, resources that can be used at home and school should be made available for these children during the entire deployment period.

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