

Left Behind: Children of Soldiers

Joe F. Jerles: Austin Peay State University

Recent international conflicts have increased the dangers of American military personnel. These soldiers are part of the growing contingent of military families with children. Because these children are more aware of the dangers, the stress and worry affects them in a variety of ways, especially in school-age children. This article investigates current research and action in three areas: (1) symptoms exhibited by children of deployed parents, (2) how teachers, schools, and communities recognize and respond to it, and (3) what programs have been developed or are under development to assist parents and schools in helping students learn to cope with the stresses at work. The article concludes with information and recommendations for parents, relatives, educators, and those who support them.

A sad kindergarten child said to her teacher “I don’t like the military, Miss Jones. It’s going to take my Dad away.” School personnel hear variations of this statement as a reaction to an upcoming military deployment. In another case, an eight-year old boy’s behavior deteriorated after his father left for a second deployment. His teacher and his parent both noticed changes in his appearance, school relationships, and self-discipline. His increased volatility to small stresses, changed sleep habits, and overall increased hyperactivity caused his parent to take the child to a social worker for counseling. Sessions with the social worker revealed that the boy was scared that his father, who had returned unharmed from his first deployment, might be hurt – or worse – during his current assignment (Shaffer, 2008).

Huebner and Mancini (2008) note that forty-three percent of U.S. military families have children. Since the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, the number of children with parents in the military has reached nearly two million (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, & Richardson, 2010). Over 70,000 of these children’s parents are in the military reserve and Guard branches. Typically these families are located away from military installations where support groups are most active. These families are not accustomed to long deployments

or the cycle of gone-home-gone again that has become common among military families (Houston et al., 2009). The increased length and additional cycles of deployments have increased the stresses on military families and their children leading to increased emotional distress and poor school performance.

This article focuses on some of the unique challenges faced by the children of deployed soldiers. Four strands of child adjustment to parental deployment will be examined: (1) symptoms exhibited by children of deployed parents, (2) school responses to changed behaviors, (3) support programs, and (4) recommendations.

Childhood Symptoms Associated with Parental Deployment

As the Director for the Center for Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents at the Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh, Mannarino (as cited in Stoeltje, 2009) posits that what children feel is primarily fear – fear of loss, fear of being alone, fear of the unknown, fear for the safety and well-being of the remaining parent. Stoeltje (2009) indicates these fears affect all parts of the child’s daily life while Shaffer (2008)

asserts that changes in the children of deployed soldiers are often first noticed by their teachers.

Harrison and Vannest (2008) identify several variables that influence successful management of parental deployment, including income, education, family support, local external support, the length and cycles of deployment, and age of children. Unfortunately the detection and attribution of children's negative behavior is often difficult because of the varying intensity that these factors yield. However, significant among detrimental behaviors are mood swings, aggressive behavior, inability to focus on tasks, and regression or withdrawal.

Both Heubner et al. (2007) and Pincus et al. (2010) indicate that each phase of deployment, from anticipation to return, has unique characteristics and challenges – beginning with preparing for separation. The anticipation phase of deployment builds as the date approaches for everyone in the family. When deployment is imminent, the stress can be felt by children from the pre-school years through high school. Shaffer (2008) observes that toddlers often exhibit a sense of confusion that can result in aggressive coping behaviors. Noted is a recurrence of insecurity behaviors, such as bed-wetting and excessive crying, and separation anxiety when leaving for childcare or other locations. In addition, Shaffer outlined behaviors among children with special needs, many who have decreased intellectual abilities. Changes in self-care, hygiene, sleep habits, appetite, and increased emotional instability may be magnified in these children.

Pincus et al. (2010) caution that even when training is offered to help ease the departure, the feeling of loss is still with the remaining family when a parent is gone. Young children may feel powerless to help protect the parent from danger, while pre-teen and young adult children may understand the necessity for the deployment. They are often conflicted over seeming unpatriotic for wanting their own parent home and safe.

This sense of gut-wrenching turmoil creates a high level of stress regardless of their maturity and intellectual ability. A common theme of altered behavior is that school grades begin to deteriorate, aberrant and impulsive behaviors increase, and a general mode of “touchiness” exists around these middle and upper grade students – often without their being aware of the likely cause.

During deployment, changes in family responsibilities and daily duties add to the normal challenges in a student's life (Huebner et al., 2007). Children interviewed indicated other worries, such as “Who will protect Mom and me while Dad is gone?” – revealing that the concern over harm did not apply only to the deployed parent (Houston et al., 2009). It is interesting to note that conquering these challenges, however, can result in an increased sense of self-worth among teens. One child stated a theme well-known among regular military: “Being without a parent for a year changes you. It's possible I'll get stronger” (Houston et al., p. 808). Many students felt they were better able to deal with life's challenges after surviving a parental deployment.

School Responses to Changed Behaviors

Sustaining parent contact is essential, according to Allen (2007), in order to cultivate a base of support for schooling. Allen identifies a score of anticipated behaviors from children of deployed parents and suggests ways to minimize their negative impact. For example, classroom activities can range from reading related books and news articles to sending student artwork and constructing newsletters of school activities for deployed parents. The school can help broaden parental communication via Web pages and setting up video conferences with the deployed parent. Applications such as Skype (www.skype.com), Tokbox (www.tokbox.com), and OoVoo (www.oovoo.com) have made face-to-face video calling an inexpensive reality. School-wide activities can include decorating the grounds with yellow rib-

bons and creating patriotic celebration days with flags and special programs.

School counselors posit Burnham and Hooper (2008) are in a unique position to assist children with coping through deployment and beyond. For example, play therapy was recommended for younger children to allow them to act out concerns, model reactions and, in general, express their feelings through interaction. Older children were found to respond to group sessions, role play, art therapy, and journaling. Furthermore Burnham and Hooper indicate that counselors can help all ages reveal their fears, face the practicality of what can and cannot be done, and how to support others in similar situations.

The children of reservists are often in schools with low concentrations of military children. Consequently specialized or experienced support groups and professionals may not be readily available if the family is not residing near a military installation (Harrison et al., 2008). Harrison et al. caution these “remote” schools to be particularly observant for changes in student behavior. Teachers and school staff should be cognizant of those children whose parents are being deployed or returning and design activities that allow these children to express their emotions and fears in a safe environment.

Students typically have come to view school as the one place where most people understand their fears and can provide support. Classroom teachers can become the child’s lifeline when emotions and fears surface (Burnham et al., 2008). Schools with a large population of children whose parents are deployed frequently have planned interventions. Recently the more subtle, small group response is being cultivated. Individuals or small groups of students may be allowed or encouraged to gather to discuss problems and successes. Teachers in many systems are honing the role of facilitator for these groups through in-service training.

Near Fort Stewart, Georgia, elementary schools have created small support groups where the school counselor meets with the children (Etheridge, 2009). In these groups, students share their feelings and fears with one another and the counselor or teacher present. Many of the teachers in the school are themselves former or current military, some with deployed spouses, so a common bond is forged between student and adult. Etheridge (2009) further observes the local high schools have connected with liaison officers from the nearby military installation to provide informational groups, field trips on post, and programs aimed at involving youth and the military. Trips are arranged to provide new students with familiarization tours of the base as well as local recreational spots. Etheridge (2009) asserts these activities help to ease family stress for those finding themselves with a deployed parent or who have moved to a new location while a parent is still deployed.

In a study of the effect of parental deployment on a student’s Terra Nova scores, Engel, Gallagher, and Lyle (2008) found statistically significant differences in scores of students in Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools. They found that having a deployed parent lowered a student’s NCE (Normal Curve Equivalent) score by as much as 2%. Research by Engel et al. (2008) reached an ominous conclusion: the negative effect from parental deployment lingers for as long as five years. They offered the warning that the scores studied were from DoDEA schools and students in non-military areas schools were likely to have even larger negative results.

Support Programs

Outside the school arena, social and family support systems are a must. Drummet et al. (2003) affirm that support comes from a variety of sources. For example, having family members available, work associates who can sympathize and identify, church members and specific community support groups aimed at military families

are potential sources of support. The net effect of these support groups is that they all tend to lower the separation anxiety for families of deployed soldiers. Drummet et al. contend that the key point of emphasis should be on the importance of avoiding isolation and feelings of helplessness among family members of the deployed.

Most military locations have a branch of the Child, Youth and School Services school liaisons (CYSS) under the military's Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) division which supports soldiers, families. The CYSS offers a variety of services available either free or at a reduced rate for affected families. For example, the Fort Campbell, Kentucky, website offers a large range of low-cost services (www.fortcampbellmwr.com/CYS/index.htm), including before- and after-school activities, summer trips, and employment for students. Local and national businesses sponsor these activities as a way to support our armed forces.

A School Liaison Officer (SLO) exists in all military branches to coordinate the blending of services between military and civilian groups, and to keep the lines of communication open between them (School Support Services Brochure, 2010). The SLO works with families about to deploy or who are concluding a deployment. Often, the focus of the SLO is to be an ombudsman assisting schools with military-related children who are experiencing problems.

There are also blended organizations that merge military and civilian groups in an effort to serve families who are off-post. Operation Military Kids (www.operationmilitarykids.org) is an example of an effort between military and local community support, coordinated by an SLO. More than 150,000 children have been served through activities planned by Operation Military Kids. The website acts as a clearing house for dozens of linked activities and services for families in the military. From counseling sessions and childcare references, to trips to museums and 4-H

activities, this collaborative effort of military and community seeks to help families deal with the trials of military life and the emotions connected with deployment.

A kaleidoscope of websites have been created for specialized assistance to military families, including Reserve and Guard members and their families. The Armed Forces has created Family Readiness Support Groups to assist in the needs mentioned above.

MilitaryOneSource is a large, catch-all website for use by families who can find a wide variety of assistance (www.militaryonesource.com). Advertising itself as a "twenty-four hour resource for military members, spouses and families," it has links to numerous strands of information. Features include sections on helping plan for a move, pre-deployment procedures and advice, suicide prevention, a blog for military members, audio podcasts of military families sharing experiences and advice, and many articles and podcasts on parenting. It is linked through several of the current popular Internet social networks such as Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/military1source>).

Recommendations

Based on the study of available resources to military families, this author offers five recommendations to ease the stress of deployment for children.

1. The wealth of free or low cost services to military families should be more widely publicized. Website help, online counseling, therapy sessions, and face-to-face counseling are only a small part of the variety of services made available.
2. Awareness training for educators at all levels in local schools must be more available. Counselors, teachers and school administrators need to be able to recognize when a behavior is part of a "normal" developmen-

tal cycle or whether it may be related to a deployment issue. This is often overlooked in non-military communities.

3. Reservist families in areas away from military facilities must have easier access to services. These families need special attention in order to ensure adequate access to available services.
4. A further reduction in the negative stigma associated with those who access psychological and counseling services should be imperative. The feeling persists among families that there is a “black mark” on one’s record when counseling services are used by the soldier and sometimes even the family. The military community has made a concerted effort to reduce this feeling among the troops, but it persists and must be continuously monitored.
5. Research into the effectiveness of services to all military families should be continuous and on-going. As our global conflicts continue, more troops will rotate in and out of war zones, continuing the need for counseling services for soldiers and their families. The effects of deployment on children of soldiers must be reduced and negated where possible.

References

- Allen, M., & Staley, L. (2007). Helping children cope when a loved one is on military deployment. *Young Children*, 62(1). Retrieved from <http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200701/BTJAllen.pdf>
- Burnham, J., & Hooper, L. (2008). The influence of the war in Iraq on American youth’s fears: Implications for professional school counselors. *Professional School Counselor*, 11(6), 395-403. Retrieved from Wilson Web database.
- Chandra, A., Martin, L., Hawkins, S., & Richardson, A. (2010). The impact of parental deployment on child social and emotional functioning: Perspectives of school staff. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 46(3), 218-223. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.10.009
- Drummet, A., Coleman, M., & Cable, S. (2003). Military families under stress: Implications for family life education [Electronic version]. *Family Relations*, 52(3), 279-287. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3700279>
- Engel, R., Gallagher, L., & Lyle, D. (2008). Military deployments and children’s academic achievement: Evidence from department of defense education activity schools. *Economics of Education Review*, 29, 73-82. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2008.12.003
- Etheridge, D. (2009, August 31). Programs, people help military children adjust. *Coastal Courier*. Retrieved from <http://www.coastalcourier.com/news/article/16185>
- Harrison, J., & Vannest, K. (2008). Educators supporting families in times of crisis: Military reserve deployments. *Preventing School Failure*, 52(4), 17-23.
- Huebner, A., & Mancini, J. (2008). Supporting youth during parental deployment: Strategies for professionals and families. *The Prevention Researcher* (supplement), 15, 10-13.
- Huebner, A., Mancini, J., Wilcox, R., Grass, S., & Grass, G. (2007). Deployment and youth in military families: Exploring uncertainty and ambiguous loss. *Family Relations*, 56, 112-122.
- Houston, J., Pfefferbaum, B., Sherman, M., Melson, A., Jeon-Slaughter, H., Brand, M., & Jarman, Y. (2009). Children of deployed national guard troops: Perceptions of parental deployment to operation Iraqi freedom. *Psychiatric Annals*, 39(8), 805-811. Retrieved from PsycArticles database.
- Pincus, S., House, R., Christenson, J., & Adler, L. (2010). The emotional cycle of deployment: A military family perspective. *Hooah4Health* [Department of Defense Website]. Retrieved from <http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/emotionalcycle2.htm>
- Shaffer, I. (2008). Staying strong: Coping with deployment. *Exceptional Parent*, 38(8), 66-67. Retrieved from Wilson Web database.
- Stoeltje, M. (2009, August 23). Soldiers’ children are war victims, too [Electronic version]. *San*

Antonio Express-News. Retrieved from Lexis-Nexis Academic database.

School Support Services Brochure. (2010). School support services brochure. Brochure, retrieved from http://www.fortcampbellmwr.com/CYS/SchoolSupport/Docs/SchoolSupportServices_Brochure.pdf

Author's Note

Dr. Jerles is an Assistant Professor of Education in the College of Education at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tennessee.