

Military children face more emotional challenges as parental deployments grow longer, study finds

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Children in military families may suffer from more emotional and behavioral difficulties when compared to other American youths, with older children and girls struggling the most when a parent is deployed overseas, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

Researchers found that having a parent deployed for a longer period of time and having a non-deployed parent who has struggled with emotional problems were important factors associated with whether military children would struggle themselves, according to the study published online by the journal *Pediatrics*.

The findings are from a RAND survey that examined the wartime well-being of 1,500 children from military families from across the nation, surveying both the children and a non-deployed parent or other caregiver.

"Our study suggests that children of deployed service members face emotional and behavioral challenges," said Anita Chandra, the study's lead author and a behavioral scientist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "While this finding may seem intuitive, our study begins to shed more light on the nature of the problem. Much more work is needed to better understand these challenges and to improve ways to support children throughout the deployment cycle."

The RAND study is the largest to date that explores how the children of military members are faring academically, socially and emotionally during an extended period of wartime. The project was commissioned by the National Military Family Association, an independent nonprofit group that provides support and services to military families.

"Our nation did not anticipate such protracted conflicts. We owe it to military families to better understand and address the challenges they are facing today, and may face tomorrow," said Mary Scott, chairman of the board of governors of the National Military Family Association. "By commissioning this research, we are taking the first steps to do just that."

RAND researchers say the study was intended to provide a broad snapshot of the challenges facing military children and their families, particularly during deployment. In 2009, about 2 million U.S. children had a parent in either the active or reserve component of the military.

Researchers found that across all age groups, children from military families reported significantly higher levels of emotional difficulties than children in the general population. In addition, about one-third of the military children surveyed reported symptoms of anxiety, somewhat higher than the percentage reported in other studies of children.

The types of problems that children reported varied by age and gender. Older youths had more difficulties with school and more problem behaviors such as fighting, while younger children reported more symptoms of anxiety, according to the study. Girls had fewer problems in school and with friends, but reported more anxiety than boys.

The longer the period of time a parent had been deployed over the previous three years, the greater the chance that a child reported difficulties related to deployment such as taking on more responsibilities

at home.

"Our findings suggest that the more time parents are away, the more likely it is that children will experience problems" said Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo, a study co-author and RAND researcher.

The impact of more cumulative months of deployment was more pronounced among girls, particularly during the reintegration period once a parent returns home. Researchers say this may be linked to girls taking on additional household duties when a parent is deployed and issues related to connecting emotionally with an absent parent, who is usually a father.

Chandra said researchers also were somewhat surprised to find that older children reported so many problems related to a parental deployment. Most earlier studies that examined military children focused on the problems experienced by younger children.

The study's findings that the emotional health of a non-deployed parent is closely linked with the emotional well-being of their children suggests that more services may be needed for the spouses of those who are deployed, Chandra said.

RAND researchers surveyed families that applied in 2008 for the National Military Family Association's "Operation Purple" camp, a free program for military children held at 63 sites across the nation. The mission of the Operation Purple program is to help children cope with the stresses of war. More than 12,000 children applied for the camps. More than 4,000 families were invited to participate in the RAND study.

The findings published by *Pediatrics* represent the first results from an ongoing project that is following military children for 12 months, surveying children and their families on three occasions to chart

behavior and emotional issues over time. Results from the follow-up surveys will be reported in subsequent studies.

Among those surveyed, about 57 percent of the children studied had a parent in the Army, 20 percent in the Air Force and 17 percent in the Navy. The remainder had parents in the Marines or Coast Guard. About 63 percent of the [parents](#) were in the active component, with the rest in the National Guard or Reserve. The study found no significant differences among children based on what service a parent served in or whether they were a part of the active or reserve component of the military.

About 95 percent of the children surveyed had experienced at least one parental deployment over the three years before the start of the study and nearly 40 percent had a parent deployed at the time of the interview. Ages of the [children](#) ranged from 11 to 17 and 47 percent were girls.

Source: RAND Corporation

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