

Children of combat-deployed parents show increased worries, even after parent returns

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The current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in extended and repeated combat-related deployments of U.S. military service members. While much has been reported about the problems, both physical and psychological, many bring back with them, new research out of UCLA shows that the family back home can have issues as well.

The suddenly single parents left at home and their [children](#) must quickly adjust to altered family roles and the stress of having a loved one in a distant and dangerous land, in addition to dealing with potential psychological or physical health problems the active-duty parent may have upon their return.

Reporting in the April edition of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, UCLA assistant professor of psychiatry Dr. Patricia Lester and her colleagues found that it is the number and length of repeated deployments that cause higher levels of [anxiety](#) in children and that this anxiety persists even after the deployed parent returns home.

Second, they found that the level of anxiety children experience can be predicted by the amount of [psychological distress](#) shown by both the active-duty parent and the at-home parent.

Lester and her colleagues studied 171 families in which either the mother or father was on active duty, currently deployed or recently returned from serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. Of the sample, the active-

duty parent had, on average, been deployed more than twice and had been away from home for 16 months.

The researchers found that approximately one-third of the children in these families had increased symptoms of anxiety. Strikingly, the anxiety remained even after the deployed parent returned home.

"It's known that, in general, a child's level of distress is linked to parental distress," Lester said. "Here, we found that approximately one-third of the at-home parents and almost 40 percent of the recently returned deployed parents showed elevations in anxiety and depression.

"We also found that the at-home parent showed higher levels of anxiety when their spouse was deployed. But the two key markers for anxiety in the child were the distress levels of both parents and the number of months a parent had been deployed during the child's lifetime."

Interestingly, the study suggests that school-aged boys and girls behave differently during and after a parent's deployment. Girls showed an increase in acting out and disruptive behavior when the parent was deployed, while boys appeared to have more difficulties after the deployed parent returned.

"For the boys, this may be related to reduced autonomy and increased structure in the family life upon the return of the deployed parent," Lester said.

Notably, the children also showed indices of resilience, and their experiences of other types of emotional and behavioral problems were comparable to what is seen normally within any general community of kids.

Lester noted that the military demographic in the U.S. has changed in

the past several decades to include a much larger proportion of service members with families. She said planning is needed for extended military operations to take into account the impact on family members.

"These findings suggest that there is a cumulative wear and tear upon the military family from multiple deployments during wartime," she said.

Lester and her colleagues have developed a program to help such military families. Called FOCUS (Families OverComing Under Stress), the program provides both parents and children customized training that addresses the impact of wartime deployment on families and helps them learn very specific communication and problem-solving skills to address these challenges.

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

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