

Children of deployed parents at higher risk for alcohol, drug use

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In 2010, almost 2 million American children had at least one parent in active military duty. A new University of Iowa study suggests that deployment of a parent puts these children at an increased risk for drinking alcohol and using drugs.

Using data from a statewide survey of sixth-, eighth-, and 11th-grade students in Iowa, the researchers found an increase in 30-day alcohol use, binge drinking, using marijuana and other [illegal drugs](#), and misusing [prescription drugs](#) among children of deployed or recently returned military parents compared to children in non-military families. The increased risk was consistent across all age groups. The findings are published online in the journal *Addiction*.

"We worry a lot about the service men and women and we sometimes forget that they are not the only ones put into harm's way by deployment—their families are affected, too," says Stephan Arndt, Ph.D., UI professor of psychiatry and biostatistics and senior study author. "Our findings suggest we need to provide these families with more community support."

Arndt and colleagues at the Iowa Consortium for Substance Abuse Research and Evaluation and the UI Injury Prevention Research Center, examined data from the 2010 Iowa Youth Survey (IYS) to investigate whether military deployment of a parent was associated with children's substance use.

The survey, developed by the consortium in 1999, is administered by the state and conducted every two years. Participating students answer questions online about attitudes and experiences with alcohol, drugs, and violence, as well as students' perceptions of their peers, family, school and community. Of all sixth-, eighth-, and 11th-grade students enrolled in Iowa schools in 2010, 69 percent (78,240 students) completed the IYS.

Students were also asked if they had a parent in the military and about the parent's deployment status. The researchers focused their analysis on the 59,395 responses that indicated a parent in the military, either deployed (775, 1.3 percent) or recently returned (983, 1.7 percent), or not in the military (57,637, 97 percent).

"Looking at the Iowa Youth Survey, we discovered we were right in regard to our idea that parental deployment would increase the risk for substance use behaviors in children. In fact, the numbers suggested we were a lot more right than we wanted to be," Arndt says.

"For example, sixth-graders in non-military families had binge drinking rates of about 2 percent. That jumps up to about 7 percent for the children of deployed or recently returned parents – a three-to-four-fold increase in the raw percentage."

The study showed that rates for [drinking alcohol](#) in the past 30 days were 7 to 9 percentage points higher for children of deployed or recently returned parents across all grades, while rates for binge drinking (having had five or more drinks of alcohol in a row) were 5 to 8 percentage points higher for children of deployed parents across all grades. Marijuana use was also higher in children of deployed parents, but the difference in risk was larger for older students; for sixth-grade students the risk difference was almost 2 percentage points, for 11th-grade students it was almost 5 percentage points higher.

Living arrangements matter too

A second important and unexpected finding was the relationship between parental deployment, disruption of children's living arrangements, and increased risk of substance use.

"When at least one parent is deployed, there is a measurable percentage of children who are not living with their natural parents," Arndt says. "Some of these children go to live with a relative, but some go outside of the family, and that change in these children's living arrangements grossly affected their risk of binge drinking and marijuana use."

The study found that for children who were not living with a parent or relative, those with a deployed parent had a risk of binge drinking that was 42 percentage points higher than a student from a non-military family. In comparison, children with a deployed parent who still were living with a parent had a risk of [binge drinking](#) that was about 8 percentage points higher than children of non-military families who were living with a parent.

"Deployment is going to be disruptive anyway, which is probably why we see the overall increased risk of substance use in these children. And then for those children where parental deployment means they end up living outside of the family, it's a double whammy," Arndt says. "The results suggest that when a parent deploys, it may be preferable to place a child with a family member and try to minimize the disruption of the child's living arrangements."

Iowa's military population may be more affected

Because the study surveyed only Iowa children, the nature of Iowa's military population may also affect the results, Arndt notes.

In Iowa, along with Vermont, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, the largest portion of military personnel serve with the Reserve or the National Guard. These groups of military personnel live in civilian communities rather than on military bases and may have limited access to support services and resources designed to help military families.

"States like Iowa that have a large proportion of National Guard may be more affected by this increased risk for children," Arndt says.

Although the UI study findings may be specific to families of National Guardsmen and women, Arndt notes that the results agree with previous research that focused on risky behavior for children of deployed [military](#) men and women in Washington state, which unlike Iowa has a large active duty population.

"I think our findings suggest, first, that people need to be aware that for service members and their families this is a real phenomenon, and one that should receive close attention," Arndt says. "I would also think that schools should have a heightened awareness that [children](#) from deployed parents may need extra help."

Provided by University of Iowa

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