

# Helping Children and Families Cope *with the Impact of Military Deployment*

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*“Wait for Me”:*  
Child and Family Issues Around  
Deployment and Reintegration

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# Although the Soldier May Have Come Home, He or She May Not Be at Home



## PART I

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# Overview/Objectives

- Increase awareness of the impact of military deployment on families and children
- Examine the deployment and reintegration phases and their unique challenges for families and children
- Increase awareness of children and families' psychological needs during the deployment and reintegration process

# Deployment



- Changes start *before* the family member departs (as soon as the Service member learns they are going away).
- Some children may not “process this” right away.
  - *“I just kind of blew the deployment off and didn’t really know it was going to be that long. And then when it started happening, started sinking in, it was hard.”*

# Effects of Deployment on Children and Families

- Over two million children and families have now experienced the stress of the deployment of a family member during recent wars
- All families and children face challenges when a partner/parent deploys
  - Ambiguity, uncertainty, stress
  - Role strain (e.g., single parenting)
  - Financial stress
  - Anxiety about loved one's safety
  - Problems in communication, loss of closeness/intimacy



# Challenges Facing the Soldier and Family



- Medical
- Psychiatric
- Relationships
- Employment
- Education
- Financial
- Spiritual
- Legal/Judicial
- Housing
- Citizenship





# Mental Health Needs of Military Families During Deployment

- Spouses often have problems during deployment
- A recent study\* found that military spouses have similar rates of mental health problems as soldiers.
- Spouses were more likely to seek care for mental health problems (and were less concerned with stigma) than were soldiers.
- Services were most often sought from primary care physicians, which may relate to the lack of mental health services for military spouses.

\*Eaton et al., 2008

# Spouses/Partners of Deployed Military May Feel

- Uncertain or overwhelmed by new responsibilities
- Lonely, sad, depressed
- Anxious about safety of loved one
- Increased sense of competence and independence
  - “I think families need to know that you can get through deployment, and that there are strengths that you have within you that you don’t even realize.”

# Mental Health Needs of Military Families During Deployment

- Children of deployed military are also affected\*
- Parents with children aged 3 years or older and a deployed spouse had significantly higher depression scores than those without a deployed spouse.
- Children (3 years or older) with a deployed parent had significantly higher behavior problems compared with same-aged peers without a deployed parent.

\*Chartrand et al., 2008



# Youths' Feelings About Deployment\*

- Confusion –children may not understand why a parent is deployed and has to leave
- This is especially likely to be the case for young children through early adolescents
  - *“When I was younger, I didn’t understand why he was leaving. I just didn’t understand the whole concept of the Army and, you know, your dad has to be deployed. I didn’t understand the process at all.”*

# Youths' Feelings About Deployment\*

- Loss (sadness, loneliness) – missing the person and/or their involvement in everyday activities
  - *“When my father got deployed, I was the only kid in my neighborhood whose dad got sent. No one knew besides me and my sisters how we were feeling.”*
  - *“Every morning I would take my granddaughter to school, she would cry. She would say...” I am not crying because I live with you, I just miss my mom.”*
  - *“when I asked him where his mom was.. ..he hung his head and looked at the ground and just was silent.”*

# Youths' Feelings About Deployment\*

- Nervous, worried, afraid – about if/when they will see the parent
  - *“I was angry at everybody. I’m like a big daddy’s girl, so I was really sad he was going away. And I was scared something bad might happen to him.”*
- Conflicted (multiple and changing emotions)
  - *“Well I was kind of happy that he was going away because then I wouldn’t have somebody who’s always getting mad about something that I would do wrong. But then I was sad because he might not come back. I might never see him again.”*



# Children's Risk and Resilience

- Most children are resilient, and may even have positive outcomes as a result of deployment
  - *The 15 year old begins to think, "I got to take care of my baby sister." So she would get up, braid her hair, make her lunch [and] put in little love notes...She became the mom."*
- Children who are at risk (see [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)):
  - Young children; some boys
  - Children with preexisting physical health and mental health problems

# Children's Risk and Resilience

- Children who are at risk (see [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)):
  - Children in single-parent families with the parent deployed
  - Children whose parents *had multiple deployments*
    - *Mental health and marital problems are significantly higher among military on a third or fourth deployment*
  - Children/families who do not live close to military communities, or whose parents serve in the National Guard, or Reserves
  - Children in dual-military parent families with one or both parents deployed.

# Strategies that Help Families

- Communication among family – pre, during, and after deployment (e.g., *Talk, Listen, Connect*)
  - Children's adjustment during deployment is related to good pre-departure communication\*
  - *"...I know my dad understands how I feel because before he left, like ... a couple of days before it, he sat down with us and talked with us, you know....Just, you know, he loves us and he'll try and get back*



# Strategies that Help Families

- Communication during Deployment
  - *“We actually celebrated [our daughter’s] birthday...over the computer...We had cake, we sang happy birthday...and she absolutely loved it. They kissed the computer.”*
- Social support – from family and friends

# Deployment: Strategies that Help

- Normal routines
- Staying healthy and fit
- Connecting with friends and loved ones
- Reducing/eliminating media violence exposure (especially war scenes)

*See Helping Children Cope with the Challenge of War and Terrorism*

# Coping During Deployment

## Some Positive Coping Strategies

Maintain normal routines  
Talk with friends/family/coworkers  
Take up a new hobby  
Exercise/stay physically healthy  
Get some R&R/take time off/vacation  
Reduce exposure to media  
Write about thoughts and experiences  
Listen to soothing, calming music  
Volunteer in the community/help others  
Look at the positive side of things  
See a counselor/join a support group

*See Helping Children Cope with the Challenge of War and Terrorism*

# “Take Home” Issues for Schools

- Children of deployed may show signs of stress
  - More angry/acting out behavior
    - Children - fighting, noncompliance
    - Teens – may get into substance use
  - More sad, withdrawn, anxious behavior
    - Young children – separation anxiety
  - More difficulty concentrating, paying attention
    - School performance may decline
- Ask children how they feel – don't assume they will initiate talks about their feelings

# “Take Home” Issues for Schools

- Non-deployed parent may be distressed
  - Especially true if a repeated deployment or if the military is a member of National Guard, Reserve
  - Parent may have difficulty dealing with the child's academic or behavior problems
- Teachers, school personnel
  - Help children connect and communicate
  - Monitor how children are doing – bring changes in academics or behavior to the attention of school counselor and parent

# Reunion





# Reintegration



# Deployment -> Reintegration

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKibyMn81GE>

# Reintegration Period: Mental Health Needs of Military Families

- Family members are affected by the adjustment of veterans
  - A study\* of 199 veterans with emotional problems who returned from deployment (Iraq, Afghanistan) found 75% reported family problems:
    - Feeling like guest in their own house (41%)
    - Children acting afraid/not being warm to them (25%)
    - Military feel unsure of their family role (37%)
    - Of those recently separated, 54% report conflicts involving “shouting, pushing, or shoving”
- Addressing family problems may improve the emotional adjustment of returning military

\*Sayers et al., 2009

## Reintegration Issues For The Returning Veteran\*

- The veteran may seem preoccupied with the experience of their deployment. They may be unable to talk about it or may excessively talk about it.
- The veteran may have suffered physical or emotional injury or disability.
- The veteran may expect extra attention and support for some time after their return.
- The veteran may have serious concerns about their financial or employment future.

## Reintegration Issues For The Adult Who Stayed At Home

- Life has gone on. The adult may have taken over many functions normally performed by the deployed family member.
- The adult may have handled many not so small crises. These problems may be a surprise for the returning adult.
- The adult may expect extra attention and credit for their performance during the deployment.
- The adult may expect the returning family member to accept the family as it now exists rather than returning to previous roles.

# Reintegration Issues for the Family

- Couples may find the deployment has strained their personal relationship.
- Family problems that existed before the deployment frequently reappear after deployment.
- Extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles may have provided support and service to the family during the deployment. They may have difficulty redefining their role with the family.



# Reintegration Issues for Children

- Children generally are excited about a reunion with their returning parent.
  - However, the excitement of is stressful for children.
  - Children may be anxious and uncertain about the reunion.
- Children's responses are influenced by their age:
  - *Toddlers* may not remember the parent well and act shy or strange around them.
  - *School age children* may not understand the returning parent's need to take care of themselves and to spend time with their spouse.
  - *Teenagers* may seem distant as they continue their activities with friends.

# Understanding Children



## Children: Warm Up Period

- Children may need a period of time to warm up and readjust to the returning parent. This should not be misinterpreted or taken personally.

# Reintegration Complications

Reintegration is further complicated when there are *emotional problems*, or *physical injuries*

## Common Emotional Problems

PTSD

Alcohol use

Depression

## Common Physical Problems

Traumatic Brain Injury

Loss of limbs/paralysis



# High Rates of Emotional Problems Among Military Returning From Deployment

- Rescreening\* of 88,000 US soldiers 3 – 6 months after returning from Iraq identified a large cohort missed on initial screening.
- Based on the combined screening, *20.3% of active and 42.4% of reserve soldiers* were identified as requiring mental health treatment.
- High rates of “*relationship problems*” were observed
  - This underscores the shortcomings in psychological services for family members

# Impact of Suicide

- Survivors of suicide (family, friends) suffer traumatic grief and bereavement
- Survivors are at increased risk for depression and substance abuse
- Survivors are at increased risk for suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and completed suicides
- Loss of military family member to suicide impacts family and military



# Take Home Message for Schools

- The first 3 – 6 months after deployment can be challenging
- Expect signs of stress in children and parents
- Encourage child/family to talk, listen, and connect
  - Children can benefit from having others outside the family to talk to

# Take Home Message for Schools

Problems of reintegration can continue for very long time periods (a year or more)

- Reintegration process takes time
- Monitor children at risk
- Consider mental health referrals for persistent problems or for families with a distressed veteran

# Common Barriers To Help

- Difficulty getting **time** away from family or work to attend appointments
- Concern that behavioral healthcare can harm spouse's **military career**
- Concern that person would be seen as **weak**
- **Spouse/family** might view person differently
- **Coworkers or friends** might view person differently
- It would be too **embarrassing**

# In Closing

- Some reactions in children's words...
- First 2:19 of this clip from Sesame Street
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QoOlBjXESU>





USS NEW YORK (LSD)  
STRENGTH FORGED THROUGH  
"NEVER FORGET"





# Resilience of Service Members

- Military personnel demonstrate remarkable competence and courage
- Discipline, skill, strength, flexibility
- Responsibility, duty, spirit

# Resilience of Military Families

- Military spouses and children
  - cope with multiple demands
  - master astonishing challenges
- Despite risks, always look for strengths and resilience

# Reminder: Children are greatly affected by military deployment cycle

- Separation and anxiety
- Increased behavior problems
- Fears and worries
- Changes in roles and responsibilities
- Changes in attention and concentration

# Response to Trauma is a Normal Response to Abnormal Circumstances

- The signs of a stress response, such as hypervigilance and hypersensitivity, are *normal and adaptive* responses to life-threatening events
- A history of exposure to traumatic events such as combat trauma is not a sign of personal weakness or illness

# Risk and Resilience

- Most combat veterans do not develop PTSD
- Almost all combat veterans have later experiences that resemble or remind them of combat or combat-related trauma. These reminders may serve as “triggers” to bring back thoughts or feelings associated with the original trauma exposure.



# Reminders: Military Parents

- **Military personnel who experience traumatic stress**
  - May be sensitive to noise, crowds, movement
  - May be sensitive to authority, control
  - Experience challenges to health and mental health
- **Spouses of military personnel**
  - Experience high levels of stress, role changes, strain
  - May have significant mental health challenges
  - Experience many parenting demands

# Military Family Circle

- Harris Family Story
- Role assignment
- Family Circle Discussion
- School IAT help: discussion
- Report back







# Contact information

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