



## Original article

# The Impact of Parental Deployment on Child Social and Emotional Functioning: Perspectives of School Staff

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** Since 2001, many military families have experienced multiple and extended deployments. Little is known about the effect of parental deployment on the well-being of children, and few, if any, studies to date have engaged school staff to understand whether and how parental deployments affect the behavioral, social, and emotional outcomes of youth in the school setting.

**Methods:** Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, counselors, and administrative staff at schools serving children from U.S. Army families (N = 148 staff). Participants were queried about the academic, behavioral, and emotional issues faced by children of deployed soldiers. Data were analyzed for themes in these areas, with attention to differences by service component (Active Component vs. Army Reserve and National Guard).

**Results:** Although some children seem to be coping well with deployment, school staff felt that children's anxiety related to parental absence, increased responsibilities at home, poor mental health of some nondeployed parents, and difficulty accessing mental health services affected the ability of other students to function well in school.

**Conclusions:** School staff felt that parental deployment negatively affected social and emotional functioning for some children and youth, although they felt others were coping well. Future research should examine factors related to youth outcomes during parental deployment (e.g., mental health of the non-deployed parent) and assess the effects of deployment on other measures of behavior such as school engagement and academic performance. © 2010 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:**

Military youth; Deployment; Emotional health; Schools

Multiple and extended parental deployments during the past years have placed stress on children and families already challenged by frequent moves and parental absences. According to Pentagon data, since September 11, 2001, > 800,000 parents have deployed with the U.S. military, most to Iraq or Afghanistan, with more than 212,000 deploying twice, and 103,000 deploying three or more times [1]. In 2009, approximately 1.98 million children had one or both parents in the military; 1.25 million had parents in the Active Component and 728,000 had parents in the Reserve

Components [2]. Although there are positive aspects of deployment, including increased camaraderie, sense of family pride, and financial benefits associated with deployment, they can take a heavy toll on families concerned for the safety of their loved ones [3]. Arguably, the most vulnerable are the children and youth left at home. Although younger children may not fully comprehend why a parent must leave, older children and adolescents must cope with parental deployment during a critical and rapid stage of social and emotional development, which is challenging in the most supportive and stable of environments [4].

The manifestation of this stress can develop into academic, social and/or emotional, and behavioral challenges at school [5,6]. Despite what we know generally about stress

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and its effect on school functioning, children whose parents are deployed are a unique and vulnerable population about whom we know very little. A limited number of studies have demonstrated an association between parental deployment and academic outcomes. For example, both reading [7] and math scores [8] are lower during parental deployment. More recently, Engel *et al* [9] examined standardized test scores for 56,000 children in schools run by the Department of Defense between 2002 and 2005, and found that parental deployment was associated with lower test scores, especially in cases where the parent was deployed during the testing month.

There is also evidence that parental deployment may negatively affect social and emotional outcomes for children. For instance, research conducted during Operation Desert Storm suggests that children of all ages may exhibit a range of emotional or behavioral problems during parental deployment including sleep disturbances and heightened anxiety [10–12]. One study found that children experiencing parental deployment had higher levels of depression and anxiety than those whose military parents were not deployed and that boys were more likely to exhibit symptoms than girls [10]. Kelley *et al* surveyed mothers in the Navy and found higher (but not problematic) levels of internalizing behavior among children of deployed Navy mothers relative to children of nondeployed Navy mothers [11]. Additionally, a study of children aged 5–12 years found that those with deployed parents had mental health and behavior problems at rates significantly higher than the national average [13]. Recent studies also suggest that child maltreatment and neglect may also increase during parental deployment [14].

Although these studies have provided insight into the effect of parental deployment on the emotional and behavioral outcomes of children and youth, it is not clear whether such findings are generalizable to the current cohort of children and youth experiencing longer and multiple parental deployments. It is not known, for example, whether children and youth become accustomed to the deployment tempo or whether the emotional and behavioral outcomes of such deployments compound over time. Furthermore, we know very little about the possible differential effect of deployments in children from families in the Guard or Reserve components, who are affected in greater numbers than ever before and for whom the military lifestyle is not as routine. Early research suggests that children from these families experience more difficulties from social isolation and lack of experience with military life [15,16].

The stresses of parental deployment may also present in the form of poor social and/or emotional or behavioral problems in school for all military children and youth. Importantly, early success in school, as defined by such measures as school engagement, is predictive of subsequent educational attainment, employment with higher earnings, and better health outcomes [17,18]. Therefore, an analysis from the perspectives of front line responders, such as teachers and school counselors, is merited to more closely examine

the effect of parental deployment on the emotional and behavioral outcomes of children and youth in the school setting. To date, few studies of children from military families have included the perspectives of school staff, with the exception of work by Chartrand *et al* [12] which focused on child care providers and their experience with younger children and did not provide insight into how parental deployments may affect school-aged children and youth.

The objective of this research was to examine the effect of parental deployment on the social and/or emotional functioning of children and youth in the school setting, highlighting how these challenges vary by service component (Active Army vs. Army Reserve or National Guard). Although the focus of this project was on children of deployed parents, we expect that lessons learned from this analysis may also transfer to other populations that share the common characteristics of acute periods of stress and mobility. This research was sponsored by and conducted in consultation with the U.S. Army (Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs). Research approvals were obtained from the U.S. Army, RAND's Human Subjects Protection Committee, and the school districts that participated in the project.

## Methods

In the spring of 2008, we conducted focus groups with teachers, counselors and administrative staff (e.g., principals and vice principals) at 12 schools. Of these 12 schools, six served one Army installation and the other six served another installation in a different region of the county. These installations were selected because of their continued and high rates of deployment over the past 5 years. With the help and guidance of the Army School Liaison Officers serving those installations, we selected two school districts heavily affected by deployment and serving a large number of military children. We then worked with the School Liaison Officer, district-level staff and the superintendent to select an elementary, middle, and high school within each district, which was either on-post or close to post and serving the largest military populations. A total of 24 focus groups were conducted (2 installations\*2 districts per installation\*3 school types [elementary, middle and high school]\*2 focus groups [1 teacher, 1 counselor]). Schools ranged in size from 588 students to 1400 students. Three schools were situated on a military installation, where approximately 98% of the students were military youth. Estimates of the percentage of military children and youth attending schools not on installation (the remaining 9 schools) ranged from 30%–70%, according to school personnel. It should be noted that schools generally do not have reliable data on all families who are military, so percentages are approximations. Staff reported on their perceptions of the current, previous, and upcoming deployment experiences for both their current and former students. Focus groups were held separately for teachers versus counselors and administrators.

In addition, we conducted individual phone interviews with 16 staff members across the country (teachers, counselors, and administrative staff) serving Army Reserve or National Guard children, who may be more isolated and living further from a military installation. Staff was identified through snowball sampling where those we interviewed recommended others whom we might interview from areas with high concentrations of Army Reserve and National Guard soldiers and through organizations that serve schools with Reserve and National Guard children. We sought to interview individuals working in different parts of the country and with different ages of children, although many provided district-wide support and as a result were able to comment on the impact of deployment on Reserve/Guard (R/G) children more broadly. In the end, eight interviewees were school counselors, two were principals, two were teachers, and four were other district-level staff members. Eight worked in elementary schools, one at junior high school, and two at high schools. The rest were staff at district offices that were familiar with individual school experiences. Participants were from 11 different states, including California, New York, South Carolina, and Minnesota.

Each focus group or interview began with a brief introduction of the study and participants gave informed consent to participate. Two researchers conducted each focus group or interview; one was responsible for leading the group, the other for taking notes. Focus groups and interviews were also audio-recorded so that the research team could correct notes for accuracy, add missing text, and clarify or complete any quotes. We asked school staff to comment on the following domains: (1) unique behavioral or emotional issues of these children, (2) unique social issues among children of deployed parents, and (3) unique academic issues faced by children of deployed soldiers. For each domain, we also sought to understand how these issues vary by age, gender, whether the parent is from the Active Component or Reserve or National Guard, length of deployment, and point in the deployment cycle (e.g., about to deploy, recently deployed, short periods at home during block leave, or rest and relaxation, recently returned home).

Our analyses were primarily qualitative. The interview notes were reviewed by the three members of the study team. We first edited and completed all interview notes with the help of the audio recordings and abstracted information on each study objective. To identify themes, we used techniques from the analytic tradition of grounded theory, to read a sample of transcripts and look for examples that suggest processes, actions, assumptions, and consequences. We then created a coding scheme to organize data into relevant domains and conducted an analysis separately of a sample of notes to make sure that our coding scheme effectively captured all theme areas. We then compared our codes across the three researchers to ensure consistency in our coding. We then used the study team members to summarize our data first by domain, further analyzing it by relevant themes and ensuring that themes were supported by multiple

respondents and not simply by one participant. In the next sections, we describe our key findings, and provide quantitative data (as a percentage) where available to enumerate the number of focus groups in which the theme emerged. Where relevant, we enumerate themes that emerged in the R/G interviews as well.

## Results

Although school personnel perceived many children and families to be coping well with parental deployment, our research reveals that they saw a significant number of children struggling with a range of deployment related issues that were reportedly having an effect on the child's ability to function in school. In the following sections, we summarize findings from our analysis related to these professionals' perspectives on the social/emotional functioning and associated mental health needs of these children. Given the unique experiences of R/G families, we also highlight issues that are specifically salient for these students. Unless otherwise stated, our findings were consistent across age groups as well as school demographics. All findings are reported from the perspective of the school personnel; given the scope of this study, no attempt was made to validate the findings with information gathered directly from the student or parents.

### *School personnel see parental deployments as affecting the ability of children to function at school*

According to school personnel, although many students were able to address the challenges introduced from parental deployment, there were others who were struggling with these periods of separation. Staff in the focus groups and interviews felt that student uncertainty about deployment length (25% of the groups, 25% of the R/G interviews), increased stress at home (50% of groups, 50% of R/G interviews), and the perceived mental health issues of their non-deployed parent (58% of groups, 63% of R/G interviews) contributed to difficulties in functioning at school. Furthermore, children from R/G families had an additional challenge in that they often lacked a support network within their school that understood the military experience. Half of the teachers and counselors working with Reserve Component families (50% of R/G interviews) reported only having one or two such students in their school, and many noted that those students did not know any other Reserve Component families (50% of R/G interviews). Under these conditions, a parent deployment can be an extremely isolating experience. One counselor said:

They feel like they're the only ones who feel like that – that they're going crazy. [Parental deployment] needs to be normalized... I think that is the key thing that's missing. It is an issue with the National Guard because [the families] are all spread out.

Overall, many of the focus groups participants (42%) and R/G interviewees (31%) felt that students often did not

receive complete information about their parent's deployment (e.g., when a parent will return, unforeseen extensions). They felt that this lack of information fostered fear about losing a parent. Staff also reported that for many children (83% of focus groups, 56% of R/G interviews), parental deployment led to sadness and anger, which disrupted classroom activities and affected peer relationships. School personnel in the focus groups also described important gender differences in how the deployment effect was manifested (58% focus groups). They observed that for boys, anger and aggression were more common, whereas for girls, somatic complaints and internalizing behaviors such as depression were more prevalent. Some middle- and high-school focus groups (31%) shared concerns that a few of their adolescent female students were engaging in other health risk-taking behaviors, including cutting and promiscuous sexual behavior.

I have a student who cuts herself when her dad gets ready to leave, because she thinks it will keep him here. She had it in her mind that cutting was a mental illness and when kids are really sick, the parents don't have to go out [deploy].

School personnel reported that many students were also called upon to assume more responsibility at home because the non-military parent may have to increase hours at his/her current job, take a second job, or may be struggling with personal mental health issues related to the partner's deployment. Many teachers and counselor focus groups (50%) voiced concern about the amount of responsibility placed on children during a deployment. For example, older siblings have been asked to take care of younger siblings, essentially becoming a co-parent.

They can't do their homework because they are too busy doing their chores. I had a little girl a couple of years ago that had to get her siblings up in the morning, give them breakfast, dress her brothers and the sisters, get their backpacks on, and get them ready for school before she could get ready to go to school, and then she would have to walk [them to school] and she said, "I am just so tired."

In addition to traditional household chores, teacher and counselor groups (42%) noted that many children became the emotional partners of their home caregiver, which also placed undue burden on their lives. Several focus groups (42%) and R/G interviewees (63%) shared that from their perspective, many nondeployed parents experienced depressive symptoms. These depressed parents often did not engage in the school activities sufficiently, missing meetings with teachers, not bringing children to school activities, and not ensuring that children were completing homework. Furthermore, staff members reported that some parents kept children out of school as a source of comfort to them during the deployment (i.e., not wanting to be separated from their child). Staff members reported that some students shared their anxieties about supporting their caregiver when their mother or father is deployed.

Children are little barometers – they pick up on however mom or dad is feeling and they bring that to school. They'll

carry the anger with them to school. Or sadness. If it's chaotic at home, there's a lot more hostility and impulsiveness that comes in to school.

#### *Students are losing resiliency as deployments continue*

School staff reported that some children have displayed exceptional resiliency in the face of the deployments. Staff members shared that although there might have been a decline in academic performance when the parent was initially deployed, these children were able to organize themselves to perform well in future. For instance, some students have learned skills from the first deployment that have strengthened their abilities to cope and function well for the subsequent deployments. One teacher remarked:

I have seen kids go from totally lost after the first round of deployment to picking themselves up and living day-to-day. It becomes a new "normal."

Although the deployments have become "normal" to an extent for some students, many focus groups (58%) noted that the resiliency to these events is not what it once was for many other children and families. The ability of children to confront the parental separations with the same emotional resolve has been hampered by the extended and multiple deployments. School staff reports that some children who were able to handle the first deployment fairly well have become less engaged in school work and more interested in avoidant behaviors, including the health risk-taking behaviors described earlier. In addition, some students have become more apathetic to the upcoming deployment; one teacher noted that these children have "become calloused" to the deployment. A counselor shared:

The resiliency in the family has been used up. In the beginning there was a lot of pride, and then talking about being there a long time, but families that used to be able to get kids to school on time cannot do it anymore

A difficult period for most families is reintegration, when the service member returns home. Although students generally expressed excitement to have their parent return, these returns were often challenging to the new family dynamics that had been created in that parent's absence. Students had to contend with relating to the deployed parent again as well as with any physical, mental, or emotional changes that had occurred, and determine which adult was now setting household rules. School staff in both focus groups and interviews felt that many students were not adjusting well with the returns (50% of focus groups, 19% R/G interviews).

They [students] also expect more attention when the parent returns, but if they don't get it, then they don't understand what is happening. They're confused, and they come to school, and don't know how to express their confusion. That's when you get defiance.

Although the individual and family factors influencing such resiliency may vary from child to child, school staff members have found that important factors seem to be the value placed on education by the parent or guardian

responsible for the child during the deployment, parental mental health, and the level of supervision both in the home and the community. In some focus groups (29%), teachers and counselors noted that if the child and family are in the “normal range” of functioning, they will experience some difficulties, but if there were issues before the deployment, the deployment may unduly magnify these problems. As one teacher mentioned:

If there is a strong foundation from the beginning, then it pretty much stays that way even when the parent is gone. You can take one component out and it still works.

In addition to the changes in the individual experience of students, some focus groups (17%) reported that there have been transformations in the school environment response to the deployments. In the first years of the war, there was more proactive interest in classrooms about what was occurring, but now the response in the classroom is more subdued and seen as normal life. Although school staff appreciated that there was less anxiety, they also felt that the response to later deployments was not particularly healthy because students were sharing less of their emotional state.

#### *Schools are becoming the stable place or sanctuary for students*

School staff believed that as a result of their situation at home, students are relying on the school and school staff for social and emotional support at unprecedented levels (33% of focus groups). Staff members reported that students often stay after school for long periods because the school is seen as a “safe place” for engaging with teachers and peers, and allows them to limit their time at home. Teachers shared that some children have great need for attention, and in a few instances, particularly among elementary and middle school youth, they referred to school staff members as “daddy and mom.”

I had one girl who was very clingy and very needy. I finally had to tell her, “You can have two hugs a day, and you can’t leave a class to get a hug.” This was right after her dad left. She was just so needy.

This neediness takes time for school staff, particularly those working in schools with large number of children from military families, to address and ultimately detract from their ability to focus on academic instruction. Although teachers are willing to help their students, the schools (29%) serving a large proportion of military students find the situation overwhelming at times.

I have never felt so taxed as I have this year. I have never felt so much negativity and frustration and I don’t know what to do. I am struggling emotionally because of it.

#### **Conclusions**

Although school staff perceived that many children coped well with the challenges of having a deployed parent, they felt other students were facing difficulties. This study benefits

from the perspectives of school staff, who spend a significant amount of time interacting with these youth, but to date have not been the focus of research. Our analysis identified several factors that may contribute to these difficulties, including the stress and anxiety of parental absence and poor mental health of some nondeployed parents. To address these issues, the Army and other armed services, schools, and communities should focus their efforts on identifying quickly the children who are struggling most with the deployment of a parent. Identification and support may be facilitated by improving the exchange of information between the schools and the military, and improving the linkages between community and military mental health services and increasing the availability of services.

This study identifies several important avenues for continued research. First, school staff in our study described their role as the “safe haven” for these children, given the potential instability at home. It would be useful to discuss this issue with parents to understand their views on the role of schools and their expectations of school staff. Second, school staff discussed poor parental mental health as a significant factor contributing to a child’s school success. Additional research should examine the mental health of the nondeployed parent (e.g., depression, anxiety) to determine the extent of the problem across the deployment cycle, and how support can be provided for these families.

Our research not only has implications for how we improve our understanding of the needs of children of deployed parents, it also provides lessons that can be transferred to other populations that may be highly stressed and/or highly mobile. For example, youth service providers including school staff should consider routinely obtaining information about impending transitions for a child given their effect on their school engagement and mental health. This research also provides evidence that although youth under stress can be very resilient, for some this resiliency can weaken over time. Finally, when addressing issues such as deployment, it is important to consider that the child’s support system, including parents and school staff, may be stressed as well.

Although this research is one of the first studies to examine the effect of the recent parental deployments on the functioning of children from the perspectives of school staff, it has several limitations. First, although we attempted to obtain a cross-section of teachers, counselors, and school administrators by grade level, the perspectives contained in this analysis reflect those individuals interested in participating in the research study. Such individuals may work with children who have more or fewer difficulties than the average military child. Second, our findings are based on interviews from school staff at two large military installations highly affected by deployment and from a smaller number of staff working with Army Reserve and National Guard children across the country. Although general findings converged across locations, other communities may experience different challenges related to parental deployment. Furthermore, children of parents involved in combat

operations, such as families at the study sites, may have more or different problems than families experiencing other types of noncombat deployments [19]. Third, most of these interviews were conducted between March and June 2008, and changes in perspective or in the availability of services may have occurred since that time point, given the fluctuations in how deployments are occurring. In addition, we asked participants to reflect on the collective experiences of working with children experiencing deployment, and were unable to differentiate completely between deployment and reintegration stress, as well as other life stressors that may or may not be related to parental deployment. Although we did probe on differences in parental absence and return, further analysis should query school staff at different stages of deployment to note any distinctions in student behavior. Despite these limitations, these findings provide critical insight into the experiences of children who are affected by an extended parental absence and how that translates to school functioning and their mental health.

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