



Strong, Safe, and Secure; Negotiating Early Fathering and Military Service Across the Deployment Cycle

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ABSTRACT

“Military fathers of young children often endure repeated separations from their children, and these may disrupt the early parent–child relationship. Postdeployment reunification also poses challenges; disruptions that have occurred must often be repaired in the context of heightened emotions on the part of each family member at a time when fathers are themselves readjusting to the routines and responsibilities of family life. The current study employed qualitative research with the central aim of informing a richer understanding of these experiences. Interviews were conducted with 14 military fathers of young children who had experienced separation from their families during deployment. Narratives were coded using principles of grounded theory, and common parenting themes were extracted. Fathers shared their hopes that their young children would develop qualities of strength, confidence, and self-sufficiency. They also discussed difficulty in supporting the development of these qualities in their young children due to problems dealing with the negative emotions and difficult behaviors that their children exhibited. Reliance on their parenting partner was commonly cited as an effective strategy as fathers transitioned back to family life. Implications for intervention programs include the provision of parenting and self-care skills and inclusion of the father’s parenting partner in the intervention.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Forty-four percent of US service members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan are parents, with a majority being fathers. Fathers of young children who serve in the military must negotiate military service and fathering. Men’s voices are largely absent in much of the literature on fathers and fathering. This study examines how 14 men in the National Guard and Reserve Component understand their roles and support needs as servicemembers and parents of young children. Better understanding the experiences and perspectives of military fathers of young children is necessary to facilitate the development of effective intervention strategies to strengthen military families.
- The fathers expressed wanting to help their children develop the capacity for strength, confidence, and endurance. Some fathers had difficulty comforting their children postdeployment; some became frustrated that they were unable to emotionally reengage with their young children. Some fathers had difficulty reengaging because their children’s negative emotions triggered memories from the battlefield that left them unable to respond effectively.
- Though the findings are not generalizable, these findings reveal the hopes and dreams these military fathers hold for their young children. This study also describes the difficulties some fathers have emotionally reengaging with their young children postdeployment and their efforts to reengage in healthy ways that support their child’s growth and development.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Several fathers reported difficulty reengaging with their young children and their identification of this particular challenge demonstrates their dedication to finding ways to successfully negotiate fathering-deployment transitions. Children change rapidly during early development and parents may be faced, for instance, with getting to know the toddler who was just a baby when the deployment began. Deployed parents are encouraged to maintain communication with the at-home caregiver and their young child. Young children benefit from continued reminders of their deployed parent in the form of communication via phone/skype and simply talking with their caregivers about their parent. Military-connected fathers who have returned from a deployment are encouraged to seek support to help them effectively reengage with their young children and to become re-acclimated to the routines of family life. The fathers should keep in mind that the VA offers several services to help them, including therapy and support services. In this study, several fathers reported participating in a 10-week intervention (STRoNG Military Families; Rosenblum & Muzik, 2014) to support and reinforce the bonds between their young children and themselves. These types of programs can prevent problems from beginning and can support the essential family relationships that are so critical to the healthy development of young children.

FOR POLICY

Given that National Guard and Reserve Component troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan are projected to increase as Active Duty personnel decrease, the DoD might reassess additional ways National Guard and Reserve Component families with young children can be supported before, during, and post deployment. The DoD and the VA might offer additional information and training in self-care development that supports emotion-regulation capacities. The additional information and training might also teach the fathers new skills to help them effectively co-parent with their partner. The VA might continue offering its online parenting course, especially its modules on communication, emotional and physical challenges, and helping your child with difficult emotions and behaviors. The VA might continue offering its parenting app for mobile devices, which provides on-the-go parenting resources. In addition to these tools, the VA might expand its physical parenting resources to include opportunities for parents – both the deployed parent and the stateside parent - to discuss difficulties and learn new strategies for dealing with their children’s negative behaviors and readjusting to family routines and responsibilities post-deployment. The VA might continue offering veterans and their families therapy and support services.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this study is that it is not generalizable to other military populations. Despite the limitation, the experiences of the National Guard and Reserve Component fathers might be similar to those of Active duty personnel who do not live on a base. Future research on early fathering after a military deployment should include fathers from all military branches. Future studies should include additional demographics that provide insight related to the importance of the co-parenting relationship on the healthy development of young children. Demographic factors including location and length of deployment, and quality of communication with child and spouse while deployed could also be further explored. Another limitation of this study is that the sample was majority Caucasian. Given the increase of some racial and ethnic minorities in the Military, subsequent research should oversample African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans. Researchers continuing this work should examine reengagement between fathers and young children by number of deployments to better understand the influence of repeated father-child separations on the parent-child relationship. In this study, the researchers found that some fathers looked to their spouse or significant other for ways to reengage and support their young children. More studies are needed that investigate how fathers reengage with their children postdeployment and the role the spouse plays in the reengagement. Future researchers should study what types of interventions most effectively strengthen parenting goals and strategies for both parents. It would be beneficial to continue studying military fathers with young children to further understand their unique needs.

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