



Do Family Communication Patterns Buffer Children from Difficulties Associated with a Parent's Military Deployment? Examining Deployed and At-home Parents' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

“Based on models of family resiliency, this study explored whether deployed and at-home parents’ reports of family communication patterns were associated with reported child difficulties and prosocial behavior during a military parent’s deployment. Participants were National Guard families attending yellow-ribbon reintegration events. Parents completed the Revised Family Communication Patterns short-form measure as well as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire about their oldest child. For deployed parents, conversation orientation was associated with fewer reported child behavioral problems and more prosocial child behavior during the reunion period, suggesting that conversation orientation serves as a protective factor as service members reintegrate into the family. At-home parents’ reports of conversation orientation were not significantly associated with their reports of child difficulties or prosocial behavior. Future research needs to clarify how the communicative behaviors of deployed and at-home parents might function differently in promoting children’s resiliency during a military parent’s deployment and return.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Previous researchers have found that children with deployed parents have a higher risk for anxiety and depression, academic problems, and physical health problems. Models of family resiliency suggest that communication patterns can act as a buffer. Applying this model, the researchers examined the effect familial communication patterns and behaviors had on children with a previously deployed parent.
- After controlling for the number of deployments and demographics, deployed parents who encouraged open communication with their children also reported that their children had showed more prosocial behavior and fewer overall difficulties than did deployed parents with less open communication.
- Open communication meant that parents talked with their children about a wide range of topics and showed interest in their children’s views even when those views differed from their own.
- Based on the findings, it might be beneficial to encourage military families with a deploying parent to establish open communication to better the overall well-being of the children and family.
- Future researchers should explore the perspectives of adolescents with a deployed parent to further understand the effects communication patterns have on adolescents.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Military families with a deploying parent should encourage open communication prior to the deployment and continue encouraging open communication upon the parent's return from deployment. Military families with children should consider participating in reintegration programs. Reintegration programs could help families establish open lines of communication. Based on these study findings, one of the primary focuses of reintegration programs should be teaching and encouraging open communication among military families with a recently deployed parent. For parents, this includes talking with their children about wide range of topics, disclosing age-appropriate information that helps their children feel secure, validating their children's positive and negative feelings, and listening to their children's views while explaining their own views. Deployed parents with lower conversation orientation may not adopt and adapt to new routines that the family established while they were deployed. Thus, reintegration programs should focus on reestablishing family relationships and renegotiating routines. Reintegration programs should also emphasize the benefits of open communication for the family, such as decreased difficulty with the oldest child.

FOR POLICY

Several branches of the military offer reintegration resources to military families prior to and after a deployment. Given the protective factor provided through open communication, the DoD might incorporate more resources into their reintegration programs that help service members build lines of open communication within their family. These resources might be explicitly focused on the needs of family and youth and how to renegotiate routines and relationships. The DoD, VA, and policymakers might allocate funds to support research that examines how communication patterns can be most effectively taught and disseminated to service members and veterans.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this study is that all the participants were National Guard families and all the families included parents who brought their children to attend reintegration events. To improve representativeness, future researchers should sample veterans and service members from all branches of the military and should include in the sample families who do not attend reintegration events. This study relied on the parents retrospectively answering the questions. More specifically, the at-home parents might have scored their oldest child during the reunion period based on the child's behavior while the other parent was deployed. It would be beneficial to follow the families longitudinally, from pre-deployment through deployment and to gather data from multiple family members. Future researchers should also investigate difference in reported child difficulties by deployed versus at-home parents. The differences might be due to gender expectations and stressors the at-home parent faces when the other parent is deployed. Additionally, future studies should use verified data, such as observed interactions, to complement self-reported data. Another limitation of this study is the perspective of the child's behavior came solely from the parents. Prior studies on parents and adolescents have reported slight differences in perspectives on difficulties. So, future research should include the perspectives of the child, especially if child is an adolescent. Given that open communication patterns help deployed parents reestablish relationships with their children after they return, future researchers should examine the specific communicative behaviors associated with conversation orientation, such as responsiveness, emotional expression, and constructive conflict management.

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