

## Combat-related Parental Deployment: Identifying the Impact on Families with Preschool-age Children

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### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Because military families often experience multiple lengthy, combat-related deployments, military parents and their children can have difficulties readjusting upon the parent's return from deployment.
- Returning service personnel reported difficulties with re-establishing parental roles, the loss of a structured military environment, and a perceived loss of respect. All participants indicated that pre-deployment was the most difficult time for the family due to anxiety about the upcoming separation and making parental, legal and financial arrangements.
- Many of the military families involved in this study considered themselves stronger as families as a result of these experiences. Parents also pointed out the importance of teachers and school personnel as advocates for children with deployed parents and a source of support.

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### ABSTRACT:

“This manuscript describes a qualitative study using focus group methods to gain insight into how combat-related parental deployments affect preschool-age children. Using the Resiliency Model of Role Performance for Service Members, Veterans, and their Families, the authors found that decreases in social connection and individual assets impacted the role performance of all family members. As parental role performance deteriorated, similarly did their children's behaviors and emotions. Results indicate the need for improved military and community support, especially during deployment; counseling and increased communication within the military, public schools, and family systems; and decreased stigma in help seeking for service personnel and veterans.”

## Implications

### FOR PRACTICE

Service members who are parents will face additional challenges in returning to their families and re-establishing family roles post-deployment. Many preschoolers regress developmentally during the period of deployment, so they may no longer demonstrate the same skills and emotional maturity that they possessed prior to their parents' deployment. Establishing an understanding that these changes may occur is an important part of preparing service member parents to reunite with their families post-deployment. Spouses who take on the role of a temporarily- single parent during deployment also develop their own means of coping, and may also need some time to adjust to sharing responsibilities and power in the family upon the deployed spouse's return. In these cases, it is especially important that military families keep the lines of communication open throughout the deployment process, and that counselors and social workers working with these families encourage them to do so. Although the change from the structure of military life to the unpredictability of life with small children may be challenging for returning service members, these parents should address misbehaviors calmly and consistently and can expect to re-establish relationships with their children over time. Service members should be encouraged to share personal struggles concerning their military experience with their spouses, as sharing these experiences can potentially increase intimacy and serve as a healthy outlet, allowing couples to grow closer. All of the military families in this study stated that military life and adjustment to deployment ultimately made families stronger, which should encourage service member parents who are anxious about returning from deployment.

### FOR POLICY

While families ultimately felt that they grew stronger as a result of deployments and substitute readjustments, the authors noted that the frequency and length of deployments had an effect on the stress levels of the family members. Although the sample size for this study was small, the authors recommended that the military formalize family counseling services as a benefit for returning service members. The authors identified the need for improved military and community support, especially during deployment. They recommended family counseling and increased communication within the military, public preschools and family systems. Educators can do more to explain the view of deployment and reintegration from a child's developmental perspective. A stigma toward mental health services continues for service personnel and veterans, despite the expressed benefits demonstrated by this study.

### FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The number of participants in this study was relatively small; future studies should involve a larger sample of participants and include dual-service member families and families with female service members who are parents. In addition, because the majority of families in this study had more than one child, future studies should explore whether there are differences in the dynamics of the family system or in the way a preschool-age child is impacted in families with only one child. Researchers should also explore whether having parents participate in different focus groups leads to more open expression of family struggles. Early childhood educators skilled in observing and interviewing young children should be involved in gaining additional insight into preschooler perspectives. Finally, researchers speculated about causes of domestic violence in families experiencing post-deployment stressors, so these themes should be examined further as well.

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