

Experiences of Military Youth During a Family Member's Deployment: Changes, Challenges, and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

“The deployment of a family member can be very distressing for military children, but it also can supply opportunities for growth. This study addresses calls for research on the changes, challenges, and opportunities facing youth during a family member’s tour of duty. It uses the relational turbulence model to frame research questions about how children experience a family member’s deployment. Participants were 33 military youth ranging from 10 to 13 years of age who completed one-on-one, semistructured interviews. They reported several changes to family life (Research Question 1), challenges of deployment (Research Question 2), and opportunities of deployment (Research Question 3). The results contribute to the literature by advancing theory, by providing insight into children’s experiences in their own words, and by suggesting practical guidelines for helping youth navigate a family member’s deployment.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Prior research has found that the deployment of a family member can put military youth at risk for emotional, behavioral, health, and academic difficulties; however, many military youth with a deployed family member exhibit substantial resilience. This study interviewed 33 military youth ranging from 10 to 13 years of age about their experiences of a family member’s deployment
- The study drew on the logic of the relational turbulence model to focus on the changes, challenges, and opportunities military youth face when a family member is deployed.
- Military youth reported experiencing several changes to family life during deployment, including (a) adopting more responsibilities, (b) grappling with shifts in daily routines, (c) watching their at-home parent shoulder more responsibilities, (d) missing family traditions, (e) dealing with emotional issues, and (f) viewing their family as incomplete.
- Military youth reported several challenges of deployment, including (a) missing the deployed family member, (b) being responsible for more household tasks, (c) having trouble maintaining positive relationships with siblings and the at-home parent, (d) dealing with emotional issues, and (e) having problems managing daily routines.
- Military youth also identified four positive outcomes of deployment, including (a) being well-prepared for future deployments, (b) becoming more self-sufficient, (c) having new or unique experiences as part of a military family, and (d) strengthening family ties.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Parents should help prepare military children for the changes to family life that might occur during deployment. For example, military youth might fare better during deployment if they are ready to take on new responsibilities, accommodate shifts in everyday routines, and be flexible about family traditions rather than be caught off-guard by the changes. At-home parents and caregivers also should preserve military children's daily routines during deployment, offer them opportunities to express emotion, and help them maintain regular contact with the deployed family member. Third, at-home parents and caregivers should help military youth focus on the positive outcomes of deployment and build their pride at becoming more independent.

Some military youth mentioned that transportation problems prevented them from participating in extracurricular activities that they had previously enjoyed (i.e., sports, arts and music programs, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts), so program administrators might support military families by offering public transportation vouchers and ridesharing programs. Finally, some military youth mentioned struggling under the pressure of adopting an adult role in the family, so at-home parents and caregivers should be careful to assign age-appropriate responsibilities.

FOR POLICY

Currently, the DoD supplies service members with tools to help military families prepare for an impending deployment. The DoD and policymakers might develop and offer additional tools that teach military families how to (a) talk with military youth about the changes to family life that might occur during deployment, (b) assign military children age-appropriate tasks, and (c) provide military youth with outlets for expressing emotion. Local policymakers might implement programs to help military children continue to have access to community resources while a family member is deployed. For example, local policymakers might support transportation programs to help military children continue to attend extracurricular activities during deployment.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Participants were recruited from a tuition-free residential summer camp for military youth, so the sample might overrepresent military children from certain socioeconomic backgrounds and underrepresent military children whose families are not willing or able to participate in residential summer camps. Approximately 88% of participants were children of Army and Army National Guard service members, so future research should ensure that the experiences of children of Air Force, Air National Guard, Navy, and Marine service members are better understood. Third, some participants were interviewed more than a year after deployment. Future research should interview military youth during and immediately after deployment to reduce memory biases. More broadly, this topic would benefit from longitudinal research that tracks military children before, during, and after a family member's deployment. Finally, the relational turbulence model showed promise in this study for illuminating military children's experiences, so future research should continue to use the model to illuminate how military families manage the deployment cycle.

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