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Children Whose Parents are Deployed Military

Denise LaValle-Bandini

University of Pittsburgh

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Over the past ten years, the number of American deployed military personnel has increased due to the amplified war activities in the Middle East and terrorist attacks around the world. The increased war activities have stemmed from the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in New York City, Washington, DC and Pennsylvania. As the Defense Department sends more troops to war, many children of these soldiers are left behind to deal with their feelings and the impact their parents' absence has on their young lives.

Soldiers choose their careers in the military; they are sent to boot camp or military college to gain the knowledge they need to become a soldier. They spend hours learning rank structure, military history and weaponry. However, nothing can properly prepare a young child of a soldier to say good-bye to their parent and not feel the ill affects of their departure and absence.

Young children of deployed military parents often have to deal with emotions during their crucial developmental years without a guidebook or training. Emotions, and how to expresses them, can be somewhat learned and impacted by a family's belief system, religion, or culture. However, young children and their families may not be well equipped to deal with the raw emotions of a loved ones deployment in the military.

Young children may show signs of sadness; a disliking towards the military branch their parent serves, or generalized stress from the separation from their parent. These children may have the love and support of their family, teachers, neighbors and friends; this kind of support may not be enough for the young child to navigate through their emotions in a healthy way and sometimes help from a professional mental health practitioner may be needed.

A recent study conducted by Gregory Gorman, MD and his colleagues found a significant increase in pediatric mental and behavioral complaints occurred when a military parent deployed. The article published in *Pediatrics, Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, concluded “Mental and behavioral health visits increased by 11% in these children when a military parent deployed; behavioral disorders increased 19% and stress disorders increased 18%” (Gorman, Eide & Hisle-Gorman, 2010, p.1). The study looked at 642,397 children between the ages of 3 and 8 years who were classified as military dependents. These children were diagnosed with anxiety disorders, behavioral disorders and pediatric stress disorders.

Symptoms of an anxiety disorder in a child may include excessive anxiety and worry, occurring often than not for at least six months, along with hard to control worry. In addition, restlessness, fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating and disturbed sleep may also accompany this anxiety (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). These symptoms are in line with the feelings a child could exhibit when their parent is deployed in the military. Dr. Gorman’s study also revealed Attention Deficit Disorder was the most diagnosed behavioral disorder within these children. Attention Deficit Disorder may include symptoms of inattentiveness, impulsivity, and impaired listening skills. The inattentive form of this disorder can cause students to perform poorly in school and make hasty errors in their schoolwork (Austin, V. & Sciarra, D., 2010, p. 90).

Helping a child cope with their emotions when a parent is deployed can be multifaceted. The family, along with teachers, schools, community groups and their church can help them to deal with their feelings as well as provide them with positive activities to do to help them stay connected to their parent who is overseas. Megan Allen, a first grade teacher, and Dr. Lynn

Staley, a professor at Ball State University, created helpful tips to help children cope during their parent's deployment. They recommend to parents that the deployed parents record themselves reading their child's favorite book so they can listen to it when they are gone. The classroom teacher of the child can create activities where the child and his or her classmates write letters to the deployed parent along with a photo of the students. Including a copy of the school's newsletter will also help the parent feel connected to their child while they are away. Schools can help by planning American Spirit Day by having the children wear red, white and blue. In addition, the students can tie yellow ribbons around the school and decorate their classrooms (Allen, M. & Staley, L., 2007, p.5).

Our country as a whole realizes the importance of supporting our troops, as well as the families they leave behind. Many resources have been created based on recent research to help military families and their communities cope with this increased deployment of our fellow Americans. The military has established a website for families to utilize which provides information on parenting changes and deployments at [www.militarylife.com](http://www.militarylife.com) and even Sesame Street has a video available for children to watch as Elmo's father discusses how he has to go away for a while for his job, [www.sesameworkshop.org](http://www.sesameworkshop.org)

The emotions these children feel are real and should be addressed in positive and nurturing environments so that the child may move through this experience without falter. Based on current research, this is a possible task for the child and their family as long as they are educated regarding the resources that are available to them. The parent who is deployed can do their part even though they are thousands of miles away; and the parent or family members who are left at home with the child has the everyday task of helping the child through this emotional time. The military, along with the private sector of mental health, now have evidence-based

practices to help the children and their families through the times of deployment. These children are resilient; however, extra help may be needed for some of them when a military parent is away from home. The more support and help the child receives at this crucial time the better outcome for their emotional health.

## References

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