

Military Deployment: Effects on Families and Children and Implications for Teachers

Jessica R. Cobb

Valdosta State University

December 2009

Abstract

Literature regarding military deployment, the deployment cycle, its effect on military families and children, and implication and strategies for teachers are examined. Deployment is defined as any assignment away from one's home, whether it is overseas or in the states, or during peacetime or wartime. Military families must deal with specific stressors throughout the both time at home and deployment. Children face strong emotional, behavioral, and academic effects during a parent's deployment. Teachers are a valuable resource in the students' coping and should be educated on the effects of deployment, as well as be prepared to implement strategies for success. Military deployment is an issue that our country faces, but it is one that can be handled appropriately.

Military Deployment: Effects on Families and Children and Implications for Teachers

Before World War II, our country's military service constituted of primarily single men. However, since WWII, there has been a demographic shift from the "single man's army" to the "married man's Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines (Hunter, 1977)." At any given time, one could estimate that roughly one-third of the United States population is a veteran, a current service member, or a spouse or dependent of a veteran or service member (Black, Jr., 1993). In 1990, roughly 4 million people were in the active armed services, National Guard, or reserves. These roughly 4 million people had approximately 5 million spouses and dependents. This means that about 3.5% of the US population was either serving our country, or depending on someone serving our country.

Over the last two decades, roughly three-fourths of all active service members and reserve members have children at home, with over 2.5 million being under the age of 18 (Black, Jr., 1993; Robertson, 2008). Roughly half of those children range in age from zero to 5, and more specifically roughly 500,000 under the age of three (Black, Jr., 1993; Robertson, 2008). With over 350,000 of our service members deployed at any given time, and the high number of children affected by the absence of their parents, it is understandable why research shows the usefulness of gaining a better understanding of the military way of life, deployment, its effects on family and children, and implications for educators (Robertson, 2008; Hunter, & Nice, 1978).

The Deployment Cycle

In order to support students to the best of our abilities, it is important for teachers to be knowledgeable about exactly what is happening when a parent is deployed. When a service member is deployed, they are temporarily stationed away from home either overseas or somewhere within the United States (Allen, & Staley, 2007). These tours of duty sometimes

allow family members to relocate with the service member; however, these assignments frequently require loved ones to be separated and live apart from their serving family member (Fagen, Janda, Baker, & Fischer, 1967; Allen, & Staley, 2007). Due to current events, defense commitments, and the ever-changing military technology, members of the military are being required more than ever before to attend instructional trainings and extended tours of duty (Baker, Fagan, Fischer, Janda, & Cove, 1967). Even service men and women that are stationed in other countries have to attend trainings or overseas tours (Allen, & Staley). No matter where a family is stationed, either in the United States or abroad, there are millions of children around the world that are currently living with the difficulties of having a parent that is deployed and away from home. Teachers also need to learn about the deployment cycle so that they can better understand the emotional stressors and needs of children at different points during their parent's deployment.

The very first stage of the deployment cycle is before the parent ever leaves. This is known as Pre-deployment. Pre-deployment begins as soon as the family is notified of the deployment and is given the deployment schedule (Kim, & Yeary, 2008). This stage can be as long as a few months, or as short as 24 hours (Robertson, 2008). Though the family member is still at home, the family may enter a stage where they already feel loss due to the thought of the deployment (Kim, & Yeary). Family members might alternate their feelings between denial and anticipation, and could exhibit symptoms such as mood swings, lack of organization, forgetfulness, and depression (Robertson; Kim, & Yeary). Depending on the location of the deployment and the duties of the deployment, families' feelings could vary if the family member is entering a war zone or simply going on a training mission (Robertson). During this stage, children specifically need reassurance, open and honest communication, and frequently someone

to listen to their feelings and concerns. It is important to not give the child too much information, but still make sure that they are informed and involved in process of preparing for the absence.

The second stage begins as soon as the family member leaves, and lasts through the first month of the actual deployment (Kim, & Yeary, 2008; Robertson, 2008). During this phase, family members tend to go through a period of grief and mourning as the positive mindset leaves and reality sinks in. Depression becomes more typical and may last for weeks, while others feel a sense of relief, which can lead to guilt, as they move through the stages of the process (Kim, & Yeary). Families are working to establish new methods of communication and routines, and can feel overwhelmed as they try to effectively support and comfort one another (Robertson, 2008). This is the time when children most need a sense of security and predictability in their lives. It is important that their routine stays the same, and they realize that though things are different, they are still loved. Children also need their parent at home to stay calm and feel supported so that they can still be there for the coping children as well.

The third stage, sustainment, comes when a family finally accepts the deployment, becomes more positive and accustomed to the absence, and establishes a new family routine (Kim, & Yeary, 2008; Robertson, 2008). The family has typically established a form of communication with their loved one by this point, found some sort of support system, and found ways to stay informed about their family member's situation. However, if these routines and supports are not in place, family members might become impulsive and experience heightened stress and depression (Robertson, 2008). The child still needs routine, predictability, and understanding. It is essential that the child be involved in communication with their parent through letters, videos, emails, or any other means necessary. This is a good time for the child to

learn about positive contribution as a means of fulfilling their need for a sense of accomplishment.

The fourth stage can include many things. It is possible that the service member will find out that he or she will not be coming home as soon as expected (Robertson, 2008). This can cause frustration and worry about the family and the family members wellbeing. Alternatively, if the service member finds out they will be coming home at the scheduled time, families could be excited and anxious as they prepare for their loved one's return (Kim, & Yeary, 2008). This can still be stressful as family members wonder how their loved one has changed and how life will be different upon their return. The level of communication in this stage greatly affects the intensity of emotions during the final parts of separation (Robertson). Children may have difficulty controlling their emotions through this stage as they may be upset if the parent has to stay longer than expected, or excited as they prepare for their parent's return. It could make behavior a problem as they seek out ways to express their emotions. As with all the other stages, the emotions of the adults around the children greatly affect the emotions of the child.

The fifth and final stage, post-deployment and reunion, is often unpredictable in regards to the emotions of the family (Kim, & Yeary, 2008). There could be a struggle as families begin to renegotiate family roles and relationships. There is even evidence that this heightened stress could lead to higher risks for child or spouse abuse. Families might go through a "honeymoon stage" in the beginning that can give way to a feeling of disappointment upon the realization that things are typically never the way they used to be prior to the deployment (Robertson, 2008). The length of the deployment has a strong impact on the length and intensity of this stage as returning service members tend to experience "culture shock" as they reengage themselves in civilian life after longer tours of duty. Children might have a hard time understanding this as

they are overly excited and need a lot of attention from their returned parent. They have been saving many things to share with their parent, and often need some special alone time with the parent in order to feel loved and appreciated. If handled appropriately, the time post deployment can help strengthen the bonds of the child and the returned parent and a drastic improvement in the child's behaviors will be seen (Baker, Cove, Fagen, Fischer, & Janda, 1968). Throughout all of the stages of the deployment cycle, it is important to understand that the stressors on each individual family are different and might be handled in different ways and different lengths of time.

The Effects of Deployment on Military Families and Children

Military families live in a way that calls for frequent struggles and difficulties that must be overcome whether a family member is deployed or serving at home. As part of his or her job requirement, the military member is accustomed to frequent transitions such as civilian to military, peace to combat, assignment to assignment, and location to location (Hunter, 1977). However, the members of the military family must also deal with the stress of war, mobility, loss, and separation as a choice of lifestyle instead of a requirement of a job (Hunter; Fagen et al., 1967). Normal stressors for the military family can include frequent moves around the country or world, frequent periods of separation due to deployments, knowledge of potential danger when family members enter hostile environments, low pay, geographic isolation, and a statistically proven high incidence of young children in the home (Black, Jr., 1993). For many families, these stressors could be handled easily; however, military families must often deal with more than one of these stressors at a time.

The military family lives in a constant stage of ambiguity because there is rarely any certainty about anything, especially during the current war in an era of terrorism. People at home

are able to offer support and communicate through the many technological advances, but there is never any certainty about how long that communication will be available (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). It is common for the family of a service member to act as a support system and seem strong in the face of adversity for the sake of the loved one. Family members often feel pressure to adapt and respond in ways that support the service member so that he or she will not fail to perform job requirements, experience low morale, or leave the military prior to completion of one's term (Orthner, & Bowen, 1990). However, once there is a change in a situation, be it location, communication, or any other number of possibilities, it becomes more difficult for the family to keep up their act of strength (Huebner et al., 2007). Children are often aware of the possibility of losing a parent due to injury or death, and they are constantly reminded of this fact through media coverage. All of these stressors combined lead to a heightened state of uncertainty and a lack of predictability and routine needed by so many. These stressors and ways of life are better accepted and easier to deal with for the adults and older members of the family. However, the children often have a harder time accepting and coping with the demands of a military lifestyle.

While military children develop and mature in the same way as other children, their lives are quite different. Children of military families have stressors placed on them in addition to stressors such as puberty, school transitions, and others that children in civilian families experience (Huebner et al., 2007). Stressors such as mobility, transcultural experiences, frequent parental absence, changing family roles, and lack of structure and routine all become a part of everyday life (Rush, & Akos, 2007; Huebner et al.). However, studies do show periods of heightened stress and impaired functioning during times of parental deployment (Harrison, & Vannest, 2008). Children of active duty soldiers might be more accustomed to such changes and

frequent absences due to various job requirements; however, reservists' children are not always as accustomed to the changes and have a harder time coping. Children who are not accustomed to such changes often lose their sense of security without daily involvement and support from their parent. According to research, the deployment of the family member and the changes in one's family can negatively influence a child's emotions, academics, and behaviors. The ability to adjust to the drastic changes that come from deployment tend to depend on the length of the deployment, the type of deployment, and the ability of the remaining parent to cope with the situation

Evidence shows that the attitudes and behaviors of the parent at home greatly influence the effect of the absent parent's deployment on the child. Children tend to handle the situation better when the remaining parent shows a positive attitude during the situation, is satisfied with the marriage before the separation, and can internally cope with the situation in an appropriate manner (Black, Jr., 1993). Though some emotional reactions are normal and expected during a parent's absence, children are more likely to express negative reactions when the remaining parent has difficulty maintaining a daily routine, withdraws socially, and lacks personal independence. It is extremely important for the nondeployed parent to show a sense of personal resilience both during the deployment and after the return of the parent as the child is struggling with changing parental roles (Huebner et al., 2007). Younger children particularly need to see the remaining parent showing a strong sense of confidence and emotional well-being as they are at an age where they still rely on their caregivers to help them regulate their emotions (Kim, & Yeary, 2008). This time of deployment is especially confusing to these younger children since they do not always understand the situation (Surles, 2007). When the at-home parent exhibits

strong coping skills during the separation there is little to no significant impact on either the child's behavior or academics (Harrison, & Vannest, 2008).

When dealing with the absence of a parent due to deployment, children all express their struggles differently. However, emotional and behavioral problems can cause problems in all areas of a child's life, including academically and socially. Two of the most common symptoms of emotional distress in children are depression and anxiety (Huebner et al., 2007; Harrison, & Vannest, 2008). These two feelings can come from a child's uncertainty about their parent's whereabouts and safety, especially if they are gone for extended periods or are entering war zones (Huebner et al.; Harrison, & Vannest). Researchers have shown a direct correlation between the length and location of the deployment and the extent of which the child exhibits troublesome behaviors (Harrison, & Vannest). Children even show the same signs of experiencing a catastrophic event when a parent is deployed to a war zone. Other emotional reactions to a parent's deployment can include anger, sadness, fear, grief, loss of control, and concern. It is even common for children to experience a sense of social isolation because their peers do not understand what the child is going through. This wide variety of emotional behaviors has been shown to lead to decreased and poor academic performance, as well as the onslaught of behavioral problems as well.

Children's emotional behaviors can give way to behavioral problems. Research shows that when children experience prolonged separation they might exhibit withdrawal, hypervigilance, eating disorders, defiance, and aggression (Kim, & Yeary, 2008; Harrison, & Vannest, 2008). It is also common for younger children that are having trouble regulating their emotions to have trouble sleeping, become either overly clingy or withdrawn, and even regress to an earlier childlike state (Kim, & Yeary). Children will also tend to act out towards others,

which affects their social skills, and have a lower threshold for emotional outbursts (Huebner et al., 2007). When children lack the emotional support needed at home, there is an increase in crying, discipline problems at home, and a demand for attention from the parent and other adult figures. This leads back to the need for strong emotional support from the non-deployed parent. When there is dysfunction with the remaining parent, children also exhibit strong cases of introversion, impulsiveness, internalization, and defensiveness (Black, Jr., 1993). All of these behaviors continue to add to the academic downspin of children during a parental deployment. This is why there is a need for schools and educators to be informed and involved during the deployment cycle, and to have knowledge about ways that they can help and support the child and their family.

Implications for Teachers and Support for Families and Children

The Department of Defense currently provides specialized training for those teachers that are working at military schools on how to handle the emotional and behavioral impact of deployment (Harrison, & Vannest, 2008). While this is helpful, the majority of the children with parents in the military do not attend military schools. Educators in public schools need to understand and be aware of the needs of military children and appropriate interventions to best serve those children during their time of crisis. Appropriate action on the teacher's part could keep emotional and behavioral problems from becoming significant enough to affect the child's learning and academic abilities.

Varieties of supports are available for both children and teachers. These supports should be initiated and maintained from the time that the family learns of the deployment through approximately six months after the family is reunited (Harrison, & Vannest, 2008). At the whole district level, teachers should receive training so they are well-educated about the deployment

cycle, and have a clear understanding of normal and abnormal reactions to deployment so they know when a health referral is necessary. In order to support students on the school-wide level, schools should provide students with an opportunity for group counseling with peers in similar situations, training on the development of coping skills and social skills, and various student support activities. On an individual level, the teacher can provide a great deal of support for both the parent and the student.

Teachers should strive to support not only their students, but the at-home parents as well. In many cases, parents that have effective coping strategies and handle separation well find ways to still work together to raise their children, even from afar (Huebner et al., 2007). These parents tend to communicate regularly through email, letters, or phone calls. Teachers should take advantage of these situations by supporting the family through making digital copies of work to be emailed to the absent parent, sending emails to both parents, finding ways to do conference calls with both parents, etc. However, if the at-home parent has not found effective methods of working with the absent parent, the teacher should be able to suggest effective ways to work together and implement a strategy to keep both parents involved. Teachers should also strive to understand exactly what plans the family is using in order to support their child so that the same, or similar, strategies can also be implemented at school.

In order to support students of deployed parents, teachers should be prepared to make changes throughout the day and around the room. It is important that students still have a consistent program environment with as little change as possible in routine and procedures from before the time that the parent left (Huebner et al., 2007). For very young children, preschool is a perfect opportunity for routine and structure that a young child desperately needs while also providing an outlet to build social, emotional, and academic skills needed later in life (Surles, &

Higgins, 2007). Teachers should also embrace the child's affection for his or her parent by allowing the student to post pictures of the parent in the classroom or use transitional objects that remind him or her of his or her parent (Huebner, et al., 2007). Children also benefit from support of their connection with their parent. Teachers often have many resources available that can be used to communicate with a parent. Teachers should take advantage of audio and video tapes that can be sent to the parent in addition to any letters, artwork, or other means of communication. The Military Child Education Coalition has created theme-based kits activities, information sheets, books, and other resources that support literacy skills while also helping to meet the needs of military children in the confusing time of deployment. Items like this should be incorporated into the regular classroom curriculum (Surles, 2007). Essentially, teachers need to receive training and take advantage of all of the available resources in order to effectively support military families and students.

With the increase in the number of troops being deployed and relocated, the military has also begun to take steps to provide support for military families during their time of crisis. In order to do this, the military is striving to provide families and service members with more timely information about deployments, relocations, time frames, and locations (Orthner, & Bowen, 1990). There is also an increase in unit-based support services by including unit members' families in unit activities. This helps family members to become closer and potentially lean on each other for support while a unit is away. The military is also beginning to implement more programs to help teach families coping skills, effective relationship practices, and resource development. Most importantly, the military is providing greater opportunities for family time and giving it priority during transitional times such as relocations and deployments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the large number of children that are dependents of deployed service men and women cause the need for greater understanding of the military lifestyle, deployment, the effects on family and children, and the implications for educators. Deployment is defined as any assignment away from one's home, whether it is overseas or in the states, or during peacetime or wartime. The military family must deal with very specific stressors throughout the various stages of the deployment cycle, as well as additional stressors while the service member is still at home. Though adults tend to cope with deployment better, the children face stronger emotional, behavioral, and academic effects. Teachers are a valuable resource in the coping of students and should be educated on the effects of deployment, as well as be prepared to implement strategies to help the student succeed. Military deployment is an issue that our country faces, but it is one that can be dealt with appropriately.

References

- Allen, M., & Staley, L. (2007, January). Helping children cope when a loved one is on military deployment. *Young Children*, 82-86.
- Baker, S., Fagan, S., Fischer, E., Janda, E. & Cove, L. (1967). *An evaluation of the military family's adjustment: I. Impact of father absence on personality factors of boys*. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/38/3c/19.pdf
- Baker, S., Cove, L., Fagan, S., Fischer, E., & Janda, E. (1968). *Impact of father absence: III. Problems of family reintegrating following prolonged father absence*. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/33/52/e1.pdf
- Black, Jr., W. G. (1993). Military-induced family separation: a stress reduction intervention. *Social Work*, 38(3), 273-80.
- Fagan, S., Janda, E., Baker, S. , & Fischer, E. (1967). *Impact of father absence in military families. II. Factors relating to success of coping with others*. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/33/4d/0b.pdf
- Harrison, J., & Vannest, K. J. (2008). Educators supporting families in times of crisis: Military reserve deployments. *Preventing School Failure*, 52(4), 17-23.
- Huebner, A., Mancini, J. A., Wilcox, R., Grass, S., & Grass, G. (2007). Parental deployment and youth in military families: exploring uncertainty and ambiguous loss. *Family Relations*, 56(2), 112-122.

- Hunter, E. (Ed.). (1977). *Changing families in a changing military system*. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/35/ae/fe.pdf
- Hunter, E., & Nice, D. S. (Eds.). (1978). *Children of military families: A part and yet apart*. Retrieved December 2009, from http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/31/a3/b5.pdf
- Kim, A.M., & Yeary, J. (2008). Making long-term separations easier for children and families. *Young Children*, 32-36.
- Orthner, D., & Bowen, G. (1990). *Family adaptation in the military. Technical report 1559*. Retrieved December 2009, from http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/22/fd/ce.pdf
- Robertson, R. (2008). Understanding the cycle of military deployment: How it affects young children and families. *Exchange: The Early Childhood Leaders' Magazine*, 180, 24-26. Retrieved December 2009, from <https://secure.ccie.com/library/5018024.pdf>
- Rush, C., & Akos, P. (2007). Supporting children and adolescents with deployed caregivers: a structured group approach for school counselors. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 32(2), 113-125. Retrieved December 2009, from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=30&hid=7&sid=92802ff9-bf89-4d1b-b2d2-542ab29aa531%40sessionmgr113>
- Surles, S. (2007, December). The military child education coalition: Supporting military families during deployment. *Exceptional Parent*, 37(12), 59.

Surles, S., & Higgins, H.B. (2007, October). The military child education coalition and pre-k now: Working together to expand pre-kindergarten options for children. *Exceptional Parent*, 37(10), 81.