



Supportive communication between deployed parents and children is linked to children's adjustment

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ABSTRACT

To examine associations between continued communication with a deployed parent and the adjustment of military-connected children during deployment, 180 at-home parents/caregivers of children aged 4 to 18 were surveyed. Overall quantity (frequency) and quality (deployed parent supportiveness and child's positive emotions after communicating) of communication did not differ across age groups and genders, despite age differences in a few modes of communication. In hierarchical regression analyses, the two quality of communication measures accounted for variance in children's problem behavior and health-related well-being over and above that accounted for by two family functioning variables, caregiver's marital satisfaction and perceived stress, known to predict children's adjustment during deployments. Frequency of communication, whether synchronous or asynchronous, was generally not important, except in one quantity x quality interaction. Finally, high quality communication had general, promotive effects on child adjustment rather than protective effects most evident in poorly functioning families.

1. Introduction

Me and my Daddy usually just talk about whatever is happening at the moment. We make each other crack up and he really brightens up my day!!! ...It stinks having him away from home, but communicating really does help!

–A 13-year-old girl whose father was in Afghanistan.

With U.S. forces continuing their involvements in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, investigating how military deployments affect families and how any negative impacts can be prevented or ameliorated is critical. Deployments of military personnel can strain relationships among family members and undermine the physical and mental health of both parents and children (e.g., Gewirtz & Zamir, 2015; Trautmann, Alhusen, & Gross, 2015). For a child, deployment entails separation from an important attachment figure and source of social support, arouses anxiety about the welfare of the parent, and can introduce other stressors that often accompany deployment such as a distressed at-home parent, changes in routine, and the like. Parental deployment has been linked in multiple studies to poorer academic functioning, more health and mental health complaints and behavior problems, and lower well-

being among both children and adolescents (Card et al., 2011; Gewirtz & Zamir, 2015; Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010; Trautmann et al., 2015).

Yet many military-connected children fare well during deployments (Andres & Moelker, 2011): Why are some children more resilient than others? Might continuing communication between military parents and their children during separations help protect some children from the potentially damaging effects of separation? Today's military families have access to more technology-assisted communication tools than ever before, including video chat options such as Skype and Facetime that allow synchronous, audiovisual communication with the missing parent. Yet almost nothing is known about how military families use these communication tools to maintain their relationships during separations—and with what effect.

The present study examines communication between military parents who are deployed or otherwise away on assignment and children ranging in age from 4 to 18. Given the paucity of data on this topic, characteristics of parent-child communication (modes, amount, supportiveness, and immediate emotional impacts on the child) are described. Associations between patterns of deployed parent-child communication and children's adjustment are then examined to determine

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whether the quantity and quality of communication have implications for children's adjustment over and above those of aspects of family and caregiver functioning previously determined to be associated with children's outcomes. The findings promise to provide an empirical grounding for interventions to optimize the adjustment of military-connected children during deployments.

1.1. Relevant theory and research

Despite the potential importance of the topic, scientific evidence on parent-child communication when a parent is deployed or otherwise away on military assignment is limited. In conceptualizing influences on children's adjustment during deployment, we were guided by two main theoretical perspectives, the family stress model and attachment theory. We drew broadly on family systems theory (see Paley, Lester, & Mogil, 2013), and more specifically on the family stress model (Conger et al., 1992; and see Gewirtz, DeGarmo, & Zamir, 2017, for a recent application to military families) in deciding to include key family functioning variables in our predictive model. From a family stress model perspective, deployment is a stressor that can be expected to perturb the family system in ways that can undermine the psychological functioning of parents, the marital relationship, parent-child interaction, and ultimately the child's functioning.

Attachment theory provides another useful guiding perspective by emphasizing that separation from a parent can be highly stressful to a child and can threaten the security of the parent-child attachment, deprive the child of a secure base for exploration, and thereby negatively affect the child's functioning through quite different mechanisms than those highlighted by the family stress model (Bowlby, 1973; Kobak & Madsen, 2008; and see Riggs & Riggs, 2011, and Vormbrock, 1993, for uses of attachment theory in conceptualizing the effects of deployment on military families). Moreover, attachment theory provides a strong theoretical rationale for being interested in parent-child communication during separations. Separation motivates efforts to recover the missing attachment figure, including attempts to communicate; successful reunion with the parent reduces anxiety and restores normal functioning (Kobak & Madsen, 2008). Frequent, high quality communication with a deployed parent therefore has the potential to prevent or reduce negative effects of separation by enabling a child to maintain his or her relationship with the absent parent and its benefits. What does research to date tell us about the likely implications of both family functioning and parent-child communication for the adjustment of military children during deployments?

1.1.1. Family functioning and child adjustment

Studies guided by the family stress model and other research on the adjustment of children and adolescents to parental deployment suggest that family functioning variables such as the at-home caregiver's stress level and the quality of the marital relationship are important predictors of the adjustment of military-connected children. They not only deserve further study in their own right but need to be controlled if we are to identify any additional benefits of continuing communication with the deployed parent.

A highly stressed caregiver is likely to have difficulty maintaining family togetherness and functioning and providing emotional support to children. Stress is also linked to less frequent, open, and supportive communication in the family (Maguire, 2015; Ponnet et al., 2013). Military-connected children often function more poorly during and after deployments when their at-home caregivers are stressed or distressed (Chandra et al., 2010; DeVoe, Kritikos, Emmert-Aronson, Kantor, & Paris, 2018; Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Gewirtz et al., 2017; Knobloch, Knobloch-Fedders, Yorgason, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2017).

Similarly, the quality of the marital relationship, also threatened by deployment-related stressors according to the family stress model perspective, bears on the caregiver's stress level and mental health and on

the ability of both parents to co-parent effectively and function as supportive parents. In families living together, the quality of marital relations is associated with both the quality of parent-child relations and child and adolescent adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Erel & Burman, 1995; Woodhouse, Dykas, & Cassidy, 2009). For military families experiencing deployment, marital difficulty has been linked to child and adolescent adjustment difficulties (Knobloch et al., 2017). The marital relationship may be especially important during deployments because at-home parents generally serve as gatekeepers who shape when and how their children communicate with the deployed parent. In families living together, marital distress can lead mothers to emphasize their gatekeeping roles and result in reduced father-adolescent interaction (Stevenson et al., 2014).

1.1.2. Parent-child communication and child adjustment

Developmental research, some of it guided by attachment theory, has demonstrated experimentally that communication with a parent can relieve children's stress and separation anxiety. For example, the continued virtual presence of a parent via video appears to help toddlers cope with brief separations (Tarasuik, Galligan, & Kaufman, 2011) and for stressed girls aged 7 to 12 both face-to-face and phone interaction with their mothers, though not texting, has been reported to have stress-relieving effects on hormone levels (Seltzer, Prososki, Ziegler, & Pollak, 2012). In correlational studies of families living together, frequent, open, and supportive communication between parent and child has been linked to both good parent-child relationships and good child functioning (Branje, Laursen, & Collins, 2013; Gentzler, Contreras-Grau, Kerns, & Weimer, 2005; Robl, Jewell, & Kanotra, 2012). Moreover, among rural Chinese children and adolescents whose parents have migrated to the city for work, frequent communication with absent parents is associated with high well-being and low levels of behavior problems (Su, Li, Lin, Xu, & Zhu, 2013; Yang, Zhou, Hu, Zhu, & Sun, 2014).

Surprisingly little is known about the nature and implications of parent-child communication in military families separated by deployment, however, and the few extant studies have yielded mixed findings, some of which run against the grain of the many studies documenting benefits of frequent, supportive parent-child communication. For example, Wong and Gerras (2010), using single-item measures, reported that adolescent-reported stress was greater if deployed parent and adolescent communicated several times a week as compared to monthly or weekly. Moreover, "engaged" communication [not clearly defined] was associated with lower stress than either "shallow" or "deep" communication. Possibly frequent, emotionally intense communication at this age, in the stressful context of a parent's deployment, reflects adjustment problems and either the teen's need for support, the absent parent's efforts to help or manage the troubled child, or both. Similarly, Houston, Pfefferbaum, Sherman, Melson, and Brand (2013) asked 13 military spouses and 13 military children aged 8 to 18, retrospectively with single-item measures, how often and how well parent and child communicated before, during, and after deployment. In this very small sample, both the frequency and the perceived quality of communication during deployment were associated with more adolescent anger and loneliness in reaction to deployment and more reported behavior problems.

Other studies of military families point to positive associations between communication and adolescent adjustment, however. Rodriguez and Margolin (2015a) found that more frequent communication with fathers, measured retrospectively with a single item, was associated with lower youth depression and anxiety symptoms and buffered the negative impact of the duration of separation on anxiety symptoms. Clark, O'Neal, Conley, and Mancini (2018) reported that frequent communication during deployment, measured retrospectively, was positively linked to the adolescent's reintegration and well-being after deployment. Finally, focusing on 75 adolescents, Friedman, Sigelman, Rohrbeck, and del Rio-Gonzalez (2017) assessed the amount of

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