

Impact of Military Deployment on the Development and Behavior of Children



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KEYWORDS

• Military children • Deployment • Child development • Child behavior • Family risk

KEY POINTS

- Military culture has changed in recent years, increasing the likelihood that military-connected children will be affected by stresses unique to military life.
- Military deployment, resulting in separation of parents from their families for long periods of time, has repercussions on child development and behavior.
- Interventions to strengthen family resilience and parenting skills/coping have shown promise in mitigating potentially negative outcomes following deployment.
- More research, including longitudinal studies of military families, is needed to design further interventions and to bolster policies that support military families.

INTRODUCTION

In 1973, the US military initiated a significant shift within its own culture, transitioning from a draft force to an all-volunteer force (AVF), and consequently the lives of military families has gained increasing importance in military policy. Before this time, most who embraced the military as a lifelong career tended to be senior military service members, with most of the force consisting of young, unmarried men who served a tour and transitioned to civilian life before beginning a family. With the introduction of the AVF, larger groups of younger service members joined and remained in the military, and the growing population of junior military service members began families and

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chose the military as a career.¹ The AVF military has seen the longest sustained deployment of service members to Afghanistan and Iraq²; consequently, deployment has become a way of life for military families, with stateside family members serving the military in their own unique ways. The welfare of military families has gained attention at the nation's highest levels with President Obama declaring "the care and support of military families a top national security policy priority."³

Provision of this care occurs in medical and mental health practices across the country. The scope of clinical practice involving military-connected children is broad, because of the widespread presence of military families in communities across the United States, many of which do not surround military installations. For the purposes of this article, the military family is defined as the spouses and dependent children of active duty (AD), National Guard, and Reserve military service members; many of the available studies involve current military-connected children, although the authors recognize that there are many other affected families of military veterans.

MILITARY CULTURE

Demographics

With the growing number of military service members remaining on AD while they begin families, military family members outnumber military personnel by 1.36 to 1, and there is a growing diversity of family forms. In 2014, 665,619 spouses and more than 1.12 million dependent children lived in AD families, and 381,773 spouses and 699,835 dependent children lived in Guard and Reserve families. Another 2 million children are dependents of veterans, bringing the total number of military-connected children to 4 million.⁴

Some specific financial and social circumstances create an environment in which military members are more likely to be married and to have children at younger ages compared with civilian counterparts. Almost all military service members have high job security for a contracted service commitment typically lasting a few years, and active military members have higher income levels than civilian counterparts in many career fields.⁵ Increased housing allowance following marriage, the presence of stable health care for the entire family, and the provision of quality day care and other family support services all remove some of the potential financial barriers to beginning a family at younger ages.⁶ The military tends to draw people with conservative family values, thus increasing the likelihood that those involved in the military will marry and begin families at younger ages, as well.⁷ For those services in which most of the force is young, such as the Marine Corps, service members marry at younger ages and have children of younger ages. In contrast, in the Air Force and Navy the organizational culture tends to value retention of experience and more advanced technological training; thus, a greater proportion of these service members tends to be older and have older children. Overall, military-connected children are younger, with the largest group between birth and 5 years of age (**Fig. 1**).⁴

School and Family Life

About 13% of children of AD parents attend Department of Defense Education Activity schools, in the United States and overseas. The remainder attend civilian schools in communities surrounding military bases.⁸ Many children of AD parents are concentrated near enough to a large military base to attend schools with staff who are familiar with military culture and have an awareness of their unique needs. However, those located far away from military bases typically attend schools and live in communities

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