

Caring for Military Children: Implications for Nurse Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Nearly two million American children belong to a military family. Armed Forces families are located in almost every state and around the globe. Military children are a unique and at times vulnerable population. Military children and adolescents may face significant stressors throughout their lives compared to their civilian counterparts. Military families encounter frequent moves and over half of these children have encountered at least one parental deployment since September 11th, 2001. Civilian health care providers often care for military children and adolescents. The purpose of this article is to provide pediatric providers with an understanding of the deployment cycle and how it relates to childhood development, to discuss common military stressors and their impact on the family, and to describe strategies and resources pediatric providers can utilize to care for this unique population. *J Pediatr Health Care.* (2018) ■■, ■■-■■■.

KEY WORDS

Military child, deployment, armed forces

Approximately 2,500,000 men and women currently serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. The Armed Forces include both the active duty and reserve components of the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard, as well as the National Guard. Over half of these service members are parents. Nearly 1,800,000 children are part

of a military family. Approximately 40% of military children are 5 years of age and younger. Children ages 6 to 11 years account for the second largest percentage, with nearly 550,000 children included in this age category. There are over 420,000 adolescents in military families (*Military One Source, 2015*). Military children are a unique, resilient, and vulnerable population. These children often face frequent moves, multiple lengthy separations from a parent, and psychosocial consequences not encountered by their civilian counterparts (*Siegel & Davis, 2013*). The purpose of this article is to describe the deployment cycle and how it relates to childhood development, discuss common military stressors and their impact on the family, and identify strategies and resources pediatric providers can use to care for this unique population.

Military children are a unique, resilient, and vulnerable population.

DEPLOYMENT

Since September 11, 2001, over 2,000,000 active and reserve members have been deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and other military operations. In the past decade, hundreds of thousands of military children have encountered at least one deployment by a parent (*Siegel & Davis, 2013*). Statistics report that between 900,000 and 2,000,000 children have dealt with a parent being deployed (*Lester et al., 2010; Nguyen, Ee, Berry-Caban, & Hoedebecke, 2014; Siegel & Davis, 2013*). Deployment time ranges from 3 to 15 months (*Maholmes, 2012*). Service members frequently are deployed multiple times over the courses of their careers.

Research is emerging, although still limited, regarding the effects of parental wartime deployments on the lives of military children and families. Maladaptive coping, increased rates of behavioral problems, and peer difficulties are among the issues described in more

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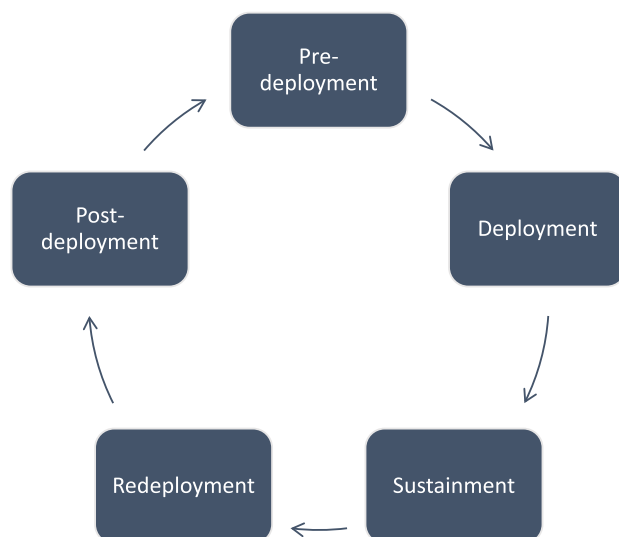
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FIGURE 1. Cycles of deployment.

Adapted from Pincus, House, Christenson, and Adler (n.d.). This figure appears in color online at www.jp pedhc.org.

recent studies of military families (Nguyen et al., 2014). There is a gap in research examining effects of deployments on infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Pincus, House, Christenson, and Adler (n.d.) describe five cycles of deployment and how these phases affect families. These cycles include pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, redeployment, and post-deployment (Figure 1). Each stage is composed of variable emotions experienced by the service member, spouse, and children. The stages must be mastered by each family member to optimally manage the effects of deployment. From a clinical practice perspective, the provider must first have basic knowledge of the deployment process to understand how deployments may affect military families.

Pre-Deployment

The pre-deployment phase begins when the military member receives official deployment orders. This phase occurs approximately 3 to 6 months before the military member deploys (Siegel & Davis, 2013). Even though the military member has not officially left for the overseas deployment, he or she is often gone for weeks at a time to complete necessary pre-deployment training, while the family remains at the current duty station. As the deployment date gets closer, couples may have arguments and experience distance and family conflict, which may worsen the child's stress (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Alder, n.d.).

The pre-deployment phase can be stressful for parents and children. Depending on the child's developmental stage, the child may struggle with confusion, fear, and anxiety (Johnson & Ling, 2013; Pincus et al., n.d.; Siegel & Davis, 2013). There is frequently doubt and

worry about the impending service member's departure. Parents and children may worry about the safety of the deployed member. Families are often unsure of what to expect. The at-home parent must consider how the daily routine of child care and household management will be affected by one parent being away. Most military parents are not located near their own parents or extended family and can often feel overwhelmed with a lack of support (Gibbs, Martin, Clinton-Sherrod, Hardison Walters, & Johnson, 2011).

Deployment and Sustainment

The deployment phase occurs during the time the service member is away and can last from 3 to 15 months. Pincus et al. (n.d) separate the deployment and sustainment phases by time. *Deployment* includes only the first month the service member is away, and *sustainment* follows deployment and continues until the redeployment phase begins. The time of separation can have both positive and negative effects on the family. The at-home parent and children may continue to worry about the deployed member's safety. Additionally, the family may continue to encounter changes in their daily routines (Johnson & Ling, 2013; Siegel & Davis, 2013).

Redeployment and Post-Deployment

The terms *redeployment* and *post-deployment* are often used interchangeably. Pincus et al. (n.d) define the *redeployment phase* as approximately 1 month before the service member returns home. The *post-deployment phase* begins when the deployed parent returns home and family reintegration begins. Both phases produce a wide spectrum of emotions. The time immediately before the service member returns can create excitement and anxiety among all family members. The service member may feel anxious about returning to the family that has changed and maintained the home life in the deployed parent's absence. Joy and relief are accompanied by adjustments of established routines (Pincus et al., n.d). Adolescents in particular may have assumed the role of caregiver and now relinquish that role to the returning parent (Malhomes, 2012).

Non-Deployment Stressors

Additional stressors faced by military families include frequent relocations, changing schools, separation from a parent that is not related to a combat deployment, and retirement or separating from active duty service. Although there is some research on the benefits of school liaison programs to assist military students with adjusting to new schools, to date, there is little research on how other facets of military life, outside of deployments, affect children (Aronson, Caldwell, & Perkins, 2011; Ohye et al., 2016).

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