



The impact of military deployment on children: Placing developmental risk in context



Candice A. Alfano^{a,*}, Simon Lau^a, Jessica Balderas^a, Brian E. Bunnell^b, Deborah C. Beidel^c

^a Department of Psychology, University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA

^b Department of Nursing, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC, USA

^c Department of Psychology, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine children's mental health and functioning in relation to deployment.
- Child reactions to parental deployment vary based on stage of development.
- Outcomes must be considered in light of parent mental health, support, and other contextual factors.
- Research focused on child coping and resilient outcomes is needed.
- Suggestions for improving methodological rigor of future work are provided.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 December 2014

Received in revised form 20 November 2015

Accepted 21 November 2015

Available online 24 November 2015

Keywords:

Children
Military families
Deployment
Mental health
Parents
Intervention

ABSTRACT

During recent conflicts in the Middle East, U.S. military families have endured multiple separations, relocations, and alterations in family structure/routines, combined with other significant stressors. This review examines what is known about children's mental health and functioning in relation to parental military deployment during conflicts spanning the last 14 years. Findings are organized and considered by age group (i.e., toddlers and preschoolers, school age children, and adolescents) in an effort to highlight unique challenges and strengths present at different stages of development. Across all age groups, numerous studies document an increase in the number of military-connected children receiving mental health services in relation to parental deployment, though specific types of problems and long-term outcomes are not well understood. Evidence for a concerning increase in rates of child maltreatment related to parental deployment has also emerged. However, findings are largely based on aggregate data and the specific perpetrator is often unclear. Overall, we emphasize several critical next steps for research in this area including investigations characterized by greater methodological rigor, consideration of broader parental and contextual influences on child mental health, objective indicators of stress and coping, and longitudinal designs to examine persistence of child emotional/behavioral problems. A focus on adaptive/resilient outcomes is equally essential for understanding long-term outcomes and developing effective intervention programs.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Contents

1. Introduction	18
2. The current review	18
3. Methods	19
4. Phases of the deployment cycle	19
5. Mental health in children during deployment	19
5.1. Young children and preschoolers	20
5.2. School-aged children	20
5.3. Adolescents	21

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Houston, 4811 Calhoun Road, Houston, TX 77204, USA.

E-mail address: caalfano@uh.edu (C.A. Alfano).

6.	School and academic functioning in children during deployment	21
6.1.	Young children and preschoolers	22
6.2.	School-age children	22
6.3.	Adolescents	22
7.	Post-deployment mental health and functioning in children	22
7.1.	Young children and preschoolers	22
7.2.	School-aged children	23
7.3.	Adolescents	23
8.	Child maltreatment	23
9.	Parental and contextual influences of child-based outcomes	23
9.1.	Mental health of the at-home parent	23
9.2.	Mental health and parenting of the service member parent	24
9.3.	Social support and communication	24
9.4.	Number and duration of deployments	25
9.5.	Other contextual considerations	25
10.	Pivotal directions for future research based on previous study limitations	25
10.1.	Theme 1: methodological rigor in assessing child-based outcomes	25
10.2.	Theme 2: the role of development versus multiple, prolonged deployments	26
10.3.	Theme 3: examining and understanding child outcomes in context	26
10.4.	Theme 4: implications for prevention/intervention programs	27
11.	Conclusions	27
	Role of funding sources	27
	Contributors	27
	Conflict of interest	27
	References	27

1. Introduction

A common saying in the military is that when one person joins, the whole family serves. Thus, families play a critical role in ensuring the success of military operations (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2011; Park, 2011). More than one-half (51.4%) of the 3.5 million U.S. military personnel are married and more than 42% have dependent children (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 2015), meaning that the number of military dependents, including spouses/partners and children, far outnumber service members. More than a decade of conflict in the Middle East has presented a range of challenges for these families including lengthy and repeated separations, frequent relocations, upheaval of family routines, role changes within the family, and the very real threat of harm or death befalling a loved one (Park, 2011). As part of active missions Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR; Iraq and Syria) and Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS; Afghanistan), as well as recently-ended missions Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF, Afghanistan), Operation New Dawn (OND; Iraq) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF; Iraq), more than 6853 service members have lost their lives and more than 52,379 have been wounded in action (Department of Defense, Defense Casualty Analysis System, as of November 6, 2015). Remarkably, many military families show great adaptability and resilience under the pressures of war (MacDermid, Swamper, Schwarz, Nishida, & Nyaronga, 2008; The White House, 2011). Others fare less well however, as evidenced by a growing body of research demonstrating high rates of mental health problems, work/academic struggles, family conflict, and maltreatment in relation to deployment (Department of Defense, 2010).

There is agreement that the emotional health and well-being of children from military families should be a national priority (The White House, 2011) yet existing gaps and limitations in research render it difficult to know how to best respond to these needs. For example, a majority of investigations to date have utilized broad measures of psychopathology, failed to include relevant comparison control groups, and focused exclusively on problem behaviors (as opposed to strengths) during periods of deployment. Further, even though child outcomes cannot be adequately understood outside of the broader family environment, few studies have systematically assessed the influence of contextual factors (e.g., living arrangements during deployment,

levels of stress in the at-home parent, frequency of contact with the deployed parent) as contributors toward risk. Together, these limitations raise concern as to whether the myriad of well-intended interventions developed for military families in recent years (e.g., Beardslee et al., 2011; Gewirtz et al., 2011; Lester et al., 2011; Wilson, Wilkum, Chernichky, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Broniarczyk, 2011) track specifically onto the actual needs of children and families.

Perhaps an even more salient point with regard to children relates to developmental stage. Although it is well-recognized that stressful events, such as parental deployment, can play a significant role in the etiology and maintenance of early mental health problems, the ways in which children understand and respond to such events are heavily influenced by development (Compas, Connor-Smith, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Evans et al., 2013; Garnezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984). That is, the impact of any stressor is largely conditional upon when it occurs in the course of a child's life. For example, whereas young children cannot fully appreciate the meaning of a parent's absence, school-aged children and adolescents are better able to comprehend the nature and range of potential risks associated with deployment. In this way, younger children may be somewhat shielded from the realities of war. On the other hand, the sudden, inexplicable absence of a parent and unclear time frame for their return may be highly stressful for young children. Developmental differences in the ways children in military families respond to and cope with periods of parental separation have nonetheless received inadequate attention.

2. The current review

In the current review we examine and consider available research findings on the mental health and functioning of children in U.S. military families in relation to deployment during OIR/OFS/OEF/OND/OIF combat operations (hereafter referred to as recent conflicts). We begin with a brief description of each phase of the deployment cycle, including pre-deployment, deployment, and reintegration (post-deployment) periods to provide the reader with necessary background and context. We then examine what is known about children's mental health and academic functioning during periods of deployment. Albeit limited, we include data examining adaptive (i.e., resilient) outcomes and biological indicators of stress. This is followed by a section examining children's mental

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/903580>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/903580>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)