

Coparenting across the Deployment Cycle: Observations from Military Families with Young Children

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Abstract

Contemporary service members and their partners have adapted their coparenting to respond to the specific transitions and disruptions associated with wartime deployment cycles and evolving child development. This qualitative study draws upon interviews with service member and home front parents of very young children to characterize their coparenting experiences throughout the deployment cycle. Parents described varied approaches as they considered their children's developmental capacities, the fluidity of demands throughout deployment, and the service member's well-being during reintegration. A common theme was the key role of home front parents in facilitating the service member–child relationship through communication and maintaining the presence of the deployed parent in the child's everyday life. Reintegration challenges included redistribution of coparenting roles, the pacing of the service member into family roles, and concerns related to the returning parent's distress. Study findings highlight

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areas of coparenting throughout the deployment cycle that can be supported through prevention and intervention efforts.

Keywords

coparenting, family processes, military families, deployment cycle, parent/child relations

Nearly two decades of post-September 11 war in the United States have had profound effects on military families (Wenger, O'Connell, & Cottrell, 2018). Because 42% of military service members are parents of dependent children, how parents continue to support and nurture their children through frequent military-related separations is critically important (National Academy of Science, Engineering & Medicine, 2019). In the context of the deployment cycle, responsibility for everyday childcare and family management necessarily shifts between and among coparents and caregivers in response to the demands of each phase (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Specifically, periods of family separation, parental absence, and reintegration pose distinct challenges to the coparental alliance, coparenting practices, roles, and structure within military families (Lester & Flake, 2013). Notably, coparenting has received little attention in research on military families, even though contemporary service demands highly coordinated caregiving of military-connected children. Because early coparenting patterns and practices can have lasting impact on child well-being, consideration of coparenting is especially important in military families with very young children who are coping with repeated military separation and reintegration (Umemura, Christopher, Mann, Jacobvitz, & Hazen, 2015).

Coparenting

Coparenting is a dynamic process involving coordination among adults responsible for the instrumental care, upbringing, and socialization of their children (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti & Talbot, 2001; Mchale & Lindahl, 2011; Tissot, Kuersten-Hogan, Frascarolo, Favez, & Mchale, 2019). Encompassing much more than the division of childcare labor (Feinberg, Kan, & Goslin, 2009; Mchale, Khazan, Erera, Rotman, DeCoursey, & McConnell, 2002), the coparental dyad has been conceptualized as the executive subsystem or the decision-making unit of adults within a particular family system (Minuchin, 1974). Negotiation of the coparenting relationship may vary considerably as a function of cultural background, social class, and

family constellation (McHale & Irace, 2011). In addition, coparenting processes are not limited to the collaboration between two parents who reside in the same home (McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Thus, collaborative coparenting can be achieved through diverse processes and within nontraditional and complex family constellations, including families that are physically separated for a variety of reasons (e.g., deployment, immigration, incarceration, parental employment).

The literature reveals four major domains of coparenting, all of which are associated with the coparental alliance (McHale, 2007): alignment of child-rearing goals and approaches, division of childcare labor, quality of interpersonal interactions within the coparental relationship, and regulation of family norms and interactions (Feinberg & Sakuna, 2011). The reciprocal relationship between coparenting dynamics and child adjustment is well documented (Cook, Schoppe-Sullivan, Buckley, & Davis, 2009; Fivaz-Depeursinge, Frascarolo, Lopes, Dimitrova, & Favez, 2007). The coparenting alliance (McHale & Irace, 2011) involves the degree of support or discord present between adults when undertaking coparenting endeavors (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995). Influenced both by the level of disagreement about child-rearing, or differences of opinion regarding child-related topics such as family values, discipline, safety, and the household division of labor, a weaker alliance has been associated with elevated reports of externalizing behavior in children (McHale, Lauretti, Talbot, & Pouquette, 2002; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). In addition to the strength of the coparenting alliance, the extent to which each adult in the dyad is actively engaged in caregiving may influence a child's capacity for early emotional adjustment and family functioning (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996).

Coparenting and the Deployment Lifecycle

The study of coparenting has emerged largely from research on separated families, such as those dealing with divorce or father absence, and adolescent coparents (Florsheim et al., 2012; Kolita & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Mchale, Waller, & Pearson, 2012). While these concepts have been applied to understanding a growing array of families, scant research has examined coparenting in military families with very young children. Coparenting in military families is complicated by the repeated leave-taking of at least one parent, whether for deployments, training, or education. How coparents navigate these military-specific disruptions to family life warrants attention in order to identify periods of vulnerability and strength throughout deployment cycles and ports of entry for prevention and intervention.

DeVoe and Ross (2012) provide a conceptual framework identifying transitions that military parents and their partners face while navigating the logistical and emotional changes associated with coparenting during the phases of the deployment cycle. Throughout these changes, military parents are centrally concerned with the well-being of their children as they manage the separation and then the return of the service member parent. During the predeployment period, parents often struggle with how to communicate with their young child about the upcoming separation, and service members may feel pressure to spend quality family time while also preparing to deploy (Louie & Cromer, 2014). Throughout the deployment, each coparent establishes unique routines to cope with separation. For home front parents, a primary goal is to sustain child well-being and maintain household and work routines, while also managing worry about the deployed partner. Many deployed parents make substantial efforts to maintain connection to their children and family, as they also focus on mission and safety within the deployment theater context. Family reunion with the service member has been characterized by a pervasive sense of relief for the family and an early honeymoon phase; yet the process of renegotiating the coparenting relationship and reinvesting in life at home may present new challenges for service members (Blankenship, Jacoby, Zolinski, Ojeda et al., 2019). Bowling and Sherman (2008) describe four family reintegration tasks that address parental roles and division of labor, emotional regulation, intimacy, and meaning making. For some parents, there may be apprehension about how to reconnect and rebuild parent-child relationships after a lengthy period of deployment. For others, maintaining consistency and family structure across shorter but more frequent deployment rotations may strain coparenting processes and alliance. Over time, families need to adjust as they incorporate deployment-related experiences, including parent distress or injury, and reach for new stability.

Research on military family well-being is grounded in the principles of social ecological theory which recognizes the transactional and dynamic nature of family relationships (National Academy of Science, Engineering & Medicine, 2019). However, there has been limited research to inform intervention on coparenting in the context of wartime deployment (Lester & Flake, 2013; Wadsworth et al., 2012). Thus, the aim of the current qualitative study is to characterize the rich lived experiences and stressors of coparenting across the deployment cycle (DeVoe & Ross, 2012; Yablonksi, Barbero, & Richardson, 2015).

Methods

The current study draws from interviews conducted with service members and home front parents who participated in an intervention development

project. Specifically, parents were interviewed as part of a needs assessment to examine the needs of military families with young children who had experienced parental deployment. This initial phase of research served to inform the development of a postdeployment reflective parenting program to support returning service members and their families (e.g., DeVoe, Paris, Emmert-Aronson, Ross, & Acker, 2017). This research was approved by the Boston University Institutional Review Board and USARMC Human Research Protections Office of the Army.

Participants

The sample was comprised of 39 service members and 31 home front parents (see Table 1 for participants' demographics). All participants were recruited through events sponsored by the National Guard's (NG) Yellow Ribbon Program (NGYR) in several states in New England. Research team members attended and participated in regional events sponsored by the NGYR during premobilization, deployment and postmobilization, where staff presented information about the study and obtained "consent to contact" information from interested service members and partners. Parents were eligible to participate if their family had experienced at least one war-related deployment and had a child age 5 years or younger during that period of separation.

Procedure

In-depth, semistructured individual interviews were conducted with participants in their family home (Johnson, 2002; Seidman, 1991). When both members of a coparenting couple ($n = 19$) agreed to participate, interviews were conducted at separate times. Because of the informal setting of the home, both parents were sometimes present during one parent's interview. In these cases, questions were directed to the parent who consented to participate in the study at that time. Interviews were conducted by masters and doctoral level students and researchers who were trained by the investigators. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes. Semistructured interview guides were developed to elicit detailed descriptions of each parent's experiences of the most recent deployment cycle including preparation for an upcoming deployment, separation and homecoming, the reinstatement of the service member's relationship with their young children, coparenting roles, and coparental alliance. Service member and home front parents were asked to describe the process of shifting roles and routines across the phases of deployment. The interview guides were used to frame and structure the interview, but researchers also followed the lead of the participants, encouraging further elaboration

Table 1. Sample Demographics.

	Service Member (<i>n</i> = 39)	Home Front Parent (<i>n</i> = 30) ¹
Parent role	82.1% fathers	100% mothers
Marital status	79.5% married	96.7% married
Number of children	2.5 (1.2)	2.4 (1.1)
Age	36.7 (6.7)	35.5 (6.8)
Race/Ethnicity	79.5% White	86.7% White
	5.1% Latino	6.7% Latino
	5.1% African-American/ Black	3.3% Native American
	10.3% Other	3.3% Other
Education	17.9% high school/GED	10.0% high school/GED
	2.6% vocational/technical	3.3% vocational/technical
	20.5% some college	6.7% some college
	10.3% 2-year degree	10.0% 2-year degree
	23.1% 4-year degree	50.0% 4-year degree
	25.6% graduate degree	20.0% graduate degree
Component	79.4% NGR	80.0% NGR
Branch	89.7% Army	93.3% Army
	5.1% Air Force	3.3% Air Force
	2.6% Marines	3.3% Marines
Number of deployments	2.2 (1.6)	2.8 (2.0)
Phase of deployment	100% postdeployment	83.3% postdeployment
	44.7% redeployment scheduled	16.7% postdeployment, redemption scheduled

Note. ¹Demographic information was not provided by 1 Home front Parent.

on salient and relevant topics introduced by the parent. Service members also were asked questions intended to explore the impact of deployment and mission-specific experiences on parenting and coparenting. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were verified for accuracy against the original audio-files and deidentified to protect the confidentiality of participants prior to analysis.

Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted using all parent interviews to explore experiences of coparenting throughout the deployment cycle. Under the guidance of the investigators, two teams—one

working with service member interviews and the second with home front parent interviews—developed a codebook including broad themes related to the needs assessment (e.g., parental perceptions of children's responses during deployment, support needs, coparenting). Codes used for the current study focused on aspects of coparenting identified in the literature (e.g., support, degree of child-rearing agreement). Once all codes had been established, each interview was coded in its entirety, using Atlas.ti, by two coders; agreement was reached between the coders through weekly meetings and conferencing. After coding for the larger study was complete, the coparenting codes were sorted based on stages in the parenting cycle of deployment (DeVoe & Ross, 2012) and analyzed to identify major themes within and across interviews.

Findings

Among military families with young children, coparenting processes often undergo dramatic changes in response to separation, deployment, and eventual family reintegration. A central dynamic emerging from our interviews is the critical role of home front parents in facilitating coparenting processes across the deployment cycle and the importance of family stability for service member focus in theater. Service member and home front parents described a wide variety of approaches to coparenting as they adapted to the age and developmental capacities of their children, the fluidity of demands during throughout deployment, and the well-being of the returning service member during reintegration. While some families moved into “single parent family” mode, others worked to maintain the active involvement of the deployed coparent. Regardless of the strategy, families in which there was clear appreciation for each coparent's contribution and role during the separation appeared to cope effectively with the transitions and distance.

Notification and Goodbye

In this sample, notification for an upcoming deployment ranged from as little as two weeks to over one year. For families in which service members were notified of their orders with ample time to prepare, many parents reported a prolonged goodbye, whereby the process began well in advance of the actual departure date and included communication with their children about the deployment on numerous occasions. One service member mother whose son was three at time of her deployment related how she had “gotten him little map books, little kids maps, world maps and stuff like that” so she could explain to him that:

"Pretty soon, Mommy is going to go away for a long time." And he would always say, "Where are you going?" So I'd pull it out, and I'm like "I'm going way over here." He's like, "That's not far," you know, 'cause it looks, conceptually, it's not far.

Many home front parents reported that this process involved multiple goodbyes. A service member's departure from the home for training marked the first substantial reduction in their ability to interact with the child due to physical absence. Although some partners appreciated the ability to communicate regularly with the deployed service member, others reported that an extended goodbye was more stressful for the family in the long term. One home front mother explained the stress of multiple goodbyes: "A little kid. . . can't grasp that time, that coming and going, the 'Why? What's happening?'" She would have preferred that they just "Pull the initial band aid off (at the first departure), as far as I'm concerned, don't come home until you're done." Another home front parent elaborated on the confusion of multiple goodbyes for her son. When his father left for training, "it was horrible because he was gone, but we could still talk to him on the phone." However, when he was deployed overseas, "we can't do that now. So it's hard for a four year old who doesn't understand, 'Daddy's gone. Daddy can't call'." Factors perceived to affect the goodbye process included timing of notification, the service member's training schedule, and child age, all of which influenced caregiving responsibilities during the goodbye period and frequently increased the amount of discord within the coparental dyad.

Transitions in Coparenting at Separation

Home front and service member parents universally described tremendous shifts in household and parenting responsibilities at each transition of the deployment cycle. Not surprisingly, upon the service member's departure, families experienced a complete transfer of parenting and household labor to the home front parent. The process of separation, which was described by many as becoming a single parent, was enormously challenging for all home front parents. As one mother of two explained, the hardest part for her was "juggling everything. I'm mom, I'm dad. I work. I volunteer at my daughter's dance studio. . . the bills, the house, the car." Deployed parents generally reported having high levels of confidence in their partners and felt that they had no choice but to surrender control and responsibility while in theater. One mother described the emotional burden and the significant responsibility she bore during this time because "he absolutely trusts the faith that I will take care of everything." While some deployed parents believed they were not

truly able to coparent during separation, others described their primary coparenting goal as supporting their partners from a distance. One father expressed the importance of total reliance on his spouse to manage life at home: "It's too hard to deal with that stuff at home. . . And it's easier if you can just rely on the person that's at home to take care of everything. . . You gotta have faith in them that they can, I guess." Another service member father expressed a similar sentiment in this way:

The kids are blessed to have {their mom}. . . My wife is a fly-and-forget weapon system, okay. "Love you. I'll talk to you," and I was able to deploy knowing that our shit was tight, and tighter. . . The house runs smoother when I'm gone.

Service members who had deployed early in their child's life described their own coping strategies as ranging from intentional emotional detachment, which allowed focused attention on mission and safety, to substantial efforts to remain active as coparents through long-distance communication. Reflecting a focus on the labor of coparenting, one father service member expressed feeling that "it's impossible to coparent being that far away" because "it's all on her sitting in that house with that kid or them kids. That's who does the parenting. Doesn't matter. You can say anything you want to on the phone, you're not there to back it up." Another service member father of two young children described the transition in his role from active coparenting at home to one of emotionally supporting his wife's efforts while he was in theater:

My spouse would [be], you know, having a crappy day, complaining about the kids or something, and there's not much you can do. You can listen. You can give advice. . . It's awful because you hear, and part of you knows that your spouse is just venting, you know, about the kids spilling the Cheerios for the gazillionth time or, you know, finger painted the wall.

This father described trying to listen and "be. . . the shoulder to cry on" as his primary role in the family during deployment.

For many deployed parents, having confidence in their partner's ability to handle household and parenting responsibilities during their deployment was a powerful stabilizing force. The ability to focus on their duties in theater, including personal and unit safety, was greatly enhanced when service members trusted their partners at home. As an extreme example, in one family, the home front spouse purchased and moved into a new home with her husband's blessing from Afghanistan. Another home front mother explained how her

son had a health problem a few months prior that she had not told her husband about while he was deployed: "I don't tell him things to make him worry about us here because he's got to worry about himself over there."

Decision-making around parenting strategies and concerns, however, was sometimes painful as parents in theater reluctantly moved to "outsider" status and were forced to relinquish their everyday participation in coparenting. A deployed mother, for example, "freaked out" during a Skype call because she was able to see her toddler drinking chocolate milk, which she would not have allowed. She then described a process of letting go of being involved in daily routines and decision-making. Similarly, a father recalled how it felt to become an observer of the parenting process. Despite the fact that he communicated with his children and spouse through Skype on a regular basis, he felt "it was hard to feel it, to get the full feel because I wasn't right there." Even if there was a time he wanted to intervene as a parent, he felt that "there's nothing that I could do to even help this situation. . . . Because even if I yell through the computer they're like. . . my son will close the computer."

Coparenting Strategies during Deployment Separation

Communication during deployment. Whatever the approach taken to coparenting, participants indicated that technology created both opportunities and complications as they navigated parenting during deployments. Unlike previous generations, contemporary military families have access to a variety of ways to keep in touch and must make decisions about how and when to communicate during deployment. Even among those participants with common goals and a shared vision for child-rearing, the strains of lengthy separation, uncertainty, and logistics inherent in combat-related deployment substantially reduced opportunities for mutual support and authentic communication between coparents. There were differences among these participants in how they managed these challenges. Some service member parents chose to limit communication with their families in order to focus on their responsibilities in theater. As one father described, "getting in the zone" during deployment was his best strategy for managing his mission and the distance from his family. Another father, who deployed frequently, explained that he was not able to tolerate conflict between his two young daughters during their family calls when he was in theater. As a result, he would simply disconnect whenever his daughters argued, a pattern that his wife found extremely frustrating and which continued when he returned from deployment.

Other service members wanted to communicate consistently with the family during deployment and described supportive spouses who facilitated

regular contact with their children. For example, one service member mother spoke poignantly about contacting her children whenever she could, regardless of time of day or night:

If I died tomorrow, my older one can say, "I talked to my mom," [tearing up] and that at least I said "I love you" to him, you know? . . . If something happened to me, I wanted him to-to say, when he's 50, to his grandkids or whatever it may be, my mother said, "I love you."

Home front parents described a variety of responses to deployed parents' wishes to be in touch. On the one hand, some were exasperated by service member calls late at night or during difficult transition times in the family's routine. These spouses also expressed feeling guilty when they could not or chose not to respond to service member efforts. One mother of two young daughters explained that her husband typically called "when he was done with work over there, it was probably around 4:30 p.m. our time, but that time was often hard." Her husband "would get angry or, uh, just annoyed if I wasn't ready to talk to him." Even more, when her daughters "were just coming in, umm, from a long day at school. . .he'd expect to hear everything from them. . . And they'd blame him because they didn't want to tell [him]."

Other home front parents prioritized daily communication with their spouses, even when the timing was disruptive, specifically because they believed the contact was critical for their children. As one mother explained:

It's still good [for him] to like see the kids once a day and to talk to 'em once a day. I think that made, that made a really big difference for them. Um, it was something that they would look forward to, you know, "We get to see Daddy on the computer. . . ." It was something that they were looking forward to every day. So that helped a lot.

Among parents who described more troubled relationships, disengagement could be accomplished by either or both parents. Specifically, the home front parent might undermine the deployed parent's ability to stay connected to children by limiting contact, being unavailable or nonresponsive to the other parent's calls or outreach. Similarly, a deployed parent could choose to minimize communication with his or her family. In one family, the service member who was injured in theater "went MIA" and did not contact his wife for approximately six weeks mid-deployment. Another service member mother simply found communication with her husband and children to be emotionally overwhelming. As she recalled,

For me personally, I managed it by um (sigh) like, you know, detachment really. . . . They're over there doing their thing, I'm over here doing my thing. I will see them on the other side and today I'm just gonna get through this. . . . It's not probably not the right answer you know, probably not the best way because you know it was hurtful. . . . Um, but for me it was just the only way.

Maintaining children's emotional connection with the deployed parent. Coparenting involves both overt behaviors, which happen when caregivers are together with their children, and covert practices which are enacted by one parent when the other is absent, such as during military-related parent-child separation (Manglesdorf, Laxman, & Jesse, 2011; McHale, 1997). Among many families in our study, home front parents described making substantial and intentional efforts to support the deployed parent's connection to children through frequent and positive references, use of photos and other concrete reminders of the absent parent, and age-appropriate family projects. For example, some families used "flat daddy" cut-outs or "daddy dolls" with the service member's photo attached as a reminder to children. As one mother recognized, "Even stuff like that doll—I mean, that helps too because that's something that they can, you know, sleep with at night. . . . 'This is. . . . Daddy'." Long-term projects were especially helpful for young children to grasp the temporal aspect of deployment. A service member father described how his wife made paper chains to help the kids understand when he'd be back: "Each day, they'll take a chain link off. . . . so the kids can have like a visual. . . . They can kinda see the days taken down to know when I'm getting back, and I think that's always been helpful for the kids." Similarly, one mother of an infant and preschooler explained how she used multiple strategies to maintain her husband's presence in her young children's lives. She expressed confidence that her older son remembered his father:

We put tacks on the map on our wall and put the string so he knows where (Daddy) is, and everything. . . . I have pictures of him all over the place, and of him and the boys and stuff, and uh, my son climbed up on the shelf and was like, "Dada," and was grabbing the picture. So, he knows who he is.

Frequent reminders of and positive regard for the service member parent during the deployment separation period seemed to contribute to adaptive readjustment for these families during reintegration.

Reentry and Renegotiation of Coparenting Processes

Sharing responsibility. On the back end of deployment, families again experienced significant role strain and negotiation in the realm of coparenting.

Interestingly, service members and home front parents often described “opposite sides of the same coin.” For example, the transition from the military environment, in which service members are in charge of and responsible for the well-being of troops and comrades, to the home setting, where a spouse or partner has been in charge, was challenging for both partners. A common theme among families was the need for service members to transform their communication strategies from a militaristic to a familial style. One father laughed as he remembered his reentry into coparenting as he had to “make my way back into the relationship, make my way back into the family.” It was a challenge to assert his authority because “you don’t just come back in and say, ‘You know I don’t allow that’. Well, no they don’t know you don’t allow that. You know. . .it’s been a year (laughs).” Another father lamented, “It’s hard to walk in and not be in charge when you’ve been in charge for a long time.” Similarly, he acknowledged that “it’s hard for the spouse to give that space up again. They just worked really, really hard for a year, for 15 months. . .to keep things in order.” Another father, two years postdeployment, reflected on his experience reintegrating with his wife while adapting to home life and coparenting:

[We] were living parallel lives. So now, it’s like getting reacquainted together and saying, “Okay, this is your lane. This is your lane.” So that takes a ton of time and then there’s the individual service member is trying to recover from the 12 to 18 month deployment and all that, uh, garbage that they were exposed to. . . . That service member is-is struggling or is coming back down. Umm, so you’ve got that kind of internal process, uh, and then you couple that with, okay, but now you’re part of a team at the house, so how do we make that work?

Home front parents reported similar challenges in adapting to having the deployed parent back and sharing child-rearing responsibilities. A mother whose husband was in the elite forces recalled their initial readjustment after a third deployment and her struggle to coparent together again:

I would tell him like, “You know, I don’t tell you how to do your job so don’t tell me how to do mine.” But my mistake was, it’s not MY job, it’s our job. And that’s my mistake in the beginning. . .this is not about me and my parenting with you; this is about us and our parenting. And that’s where I created this wall and this huge like, level of friction, and it was really hard. Like, I pushed him out, I pushed him away. . . I’m a strong woman; I wanted to be in control. He’s a strong man; he wanted to be in control.

Some home front parents described hesitation or resistance when it came to letting the service member become reengaged in household routines. One

mother who had considered herself a single parent during the deployment struggled with making space for her husband: "When they come back, all of a sudden you're not a single parent, and there's shared responsibilities. . .I found it very hard to go back. . .trying to figure out our roles in the family." When her husband tried to help, she "would feel like he was taking over. I'm trying to give him more freedom as a parent, [but] you get so used to just doing it your way." In a similar vein, some home front parents were surprised at their ambivalence related to "giving up" or sharing in routines they had developed to weather the separation. For example, a mother of a toddler acknowledged her wish to give up *household* chores but wanted to maintain her role in specific aspects of her childcare routine with her son:

I wanted help doing stuff around the house. Like, I wanted help with like the dishes, the laundry, the cleaning and all that, and then I also wanted a break from [my son], but I didn't want to give up bedtime, bath time, meals. So it was like I wanted something, but I didn't wanna give it up all at the same time. And then trying to watch him do things different than how I did them was a little bit tough!

Reintegrating service members often reported a sense of alienation from coparenting routines, uncertainty about what to do with their child, disagreement with how the coparent handled child-rearing during the deployment, and reluctance to set limits. Further, even as they appreciated their spouses' herculean efforts to stay connected during the separation, many service members expressed concern that their children would not recognize or accept them, that they were no longer needed in the coparental role, or that their authority would not be respected at home. As one father noted, "they're not going to know who you are for a little while." For him, "it's a big concern, I mean it. . .she might not want to play with me, she, you know, won't come to me." Similarly, a new father expressed his fears of upsetting his daughter's relationships with other caregivers upon his return, especially because she had refused to talk with him on the phone through the entire deployment. He was "very worried that I would have to get her away from all the people she knew till then and take her home. And I was very afraid that that would affect her." A mother who had recently returned from Afghanistan and was not ready to transition back into a full parental role described her difficulty setting limits with her children: "I was like, 'but I just came home'. . . I'm not ready to discipline, I'm not ready to do that. So that was hard for my husband, for me not to discipline, to support what he had done."

For fathers especially, feeling unsure in coparental roles may have stemmed from a lack of developmental information and experience with their

children, who had made substantial gains in growth and abilities over the period of deployment. One home front mother remembered the transition:

I just remember arguing a lot about like, little things that he just didn't understand because he had not been exposed to that kind of stuff. Like the diaper bag and getting out of the house. . . He'd be like, "Well, why does everything that we have to do revolve around sleeping and eating?" and I'm like, "Because kids need structure. They need a routine. That's their security, that's what makes them feel safe. They need that to be healthy."

Pacing. For home front parents, coparenting themes also centered on the pacing of reintegration, reorganizing the division of labor, and trusting the returning parent in childcare roles. Parents described a wide range of responses to their partners including: relief at "handing over" childcare labor, frustration with the returning parent who attempted to do things differently or too quickly, interest in collaborating with the returning parent, or hurt feelings by a returning parent's lack of involvement. At one end of the spectrum, parents described working to "make room for" and support their spouses in active coparenting to facilitate such reengagement. One home front mother described how her husband "just jumped right back in," but the couple communicated intensively about how to handle minute-to-minute situations. She elaborated that her husband was "very mindful" asking her questions like: "What are they eating now? What are they doing now? What's their sleep, you know, habit now?"

Some returning parents were more cautious stepping back into active parenting, not wanting to disrupt what had been working while they were away. One father noted that the "biggest thing for me was not knowing when to step in." He recognized the need to tread lightly and slowly as he reentered coparenting because his kids "became accustomed to. . . Mommy's taking care of everything, you know. Mommy was doing the discipline. Mommy does feeding. Mommy was doing all the house chores and all the house things. . . Mommy was doing that and I didn't." This father was careful to "let her do her thing and try to ease myself back into it, not step on her toes." By contrast, a few returning parents appeared to avoid taking on any active parenting role. These service members worried that they should not attempt to become reintegrated into family life because "I'm just leaving again. . ."

The legacy of deployment: Service member well-being. Because of heightened awareness about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mental health challenges, many home front parents were deeply concerned about their service member's mental health postdeployment and potential implications for

their parenting capacity. One new mother articulated her worries about her husband's psychological status, reflecting media attention to the issue of PTSD among service members returning from war: "I think they scare a lot of people, because they say 'Well, they could have PTSD, and they can have night terrors. . .they can close down and have depression'." She disclosed concerns around letting her guard down: "My biggest fear I think was, like, night terrors, because if I was sleeping. . .what if the baby starts crying in the middle of the night and he gets into some zone, and he thinks it's somebody attacking him?"

Other home front parents took clear steps to protect their children from the potential impact of the service member's trauma symptoms. In a blended family with 5 children, a service member father returned home with severe combat stress, which resulted in him yelling "at them a couple of times." His wife, however, was able to recognize when his distress escalated in everyday parenting. He described how helpful it was for her to intervene quickly in a decisive, but nonjudgmental way:

She heard it, and she just came and took over. . . . She knew that- it bothered me enough that I knew I needed to go away. . . . Like sliding doors in a closet, she'd slide over me. . . . Take the show over, and I'd walk off and I'd just-I'd go outside and be angry with myself for getting angry because I was angry about being deployed or whatever it was. It sounds all stupid but, umm, yeah, she was really great through that.

Discussion

Our findings provide new insight into elements of coparenting among families with very young children across the cycle of deployment. Not surprisingly, the transitions associated with a service member's departure and return from deployment were especially salient for the coparents in this sample (Lester & Flake, 2013). Specifically, each parent's ability to participate in coparenting behaviors that positively influence child adjustment and adaptive family functioning (i.e., actively engaging with the child and in coparenting behaviors that augment, as opposed to undermining, the coparental alliance), fluctuated substantially during various stages of deployment.

The dramatic shift in burden and responsibility to the home front parent during deployment was clearly recognized by both home front and service member parents. Deployed parents reported feeling like they were not really able to coparent while away even if they maintained communication with their family. Reconciling different needs with regard to the timing and purpose of communication proved challenging for many military families as

they coparented long-distance (Rogers-Baber, 2017). Parents also revealed the complexity of communication, including the crucial role of home front parents in facilitating or limiting the deployed parents' access to their children. Some deployed parents attributed their ability to remain focused, and therefore effective, in theater to minimizing distractions from home and family. At reintegration, parents universally described role renegotiations that ranged from "making room" for the returning parent to power struggles around coparenting roles and routines (Bowling & Sherman, 2008). The many ways that coparents handled transitions and renegotiation of roles demonstrate the importance of coparental agreement and cooperation rather than a universal "right" way to do things.

Throughout deployment, the covert behaviors of parents at home took center stage in maintaining the deployed parent's presence and role in a young child's life. Thus, the quality and regularity of affirming references to the absent parent, clarity about his or her importance in the family, and love for the child are of paramount importance. Many participants described creative, developmentally attuned, and extensive efforts to maintain children's connection to the deployed parent. As we described, home front parents often facilitated communication between the deployed parent and the child, updated the deployed parent on developments within the child's life, provided frequent and concrete reminders of the deployed parent to young children, and frequently engaged in supportive coparenting practices to ease the service member's reentry. For many families, military service is integral to and consistent with a strong sense of shared values about child-rearing. Anecdotally, we observed that parents who were on the same page about military service also held a shared vision of child-rearing, described less disruption in the coparental alliance, and engaged in more cooperative and supportive coparenting across all phases of deployment.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our findings represent a beginning effort to understand the contextually specific processes involved in coparenting during wartime deployment in military families with very young children. Because this research was conducted as an initial assessment to explore experiences of recently deployed service members and their partners, parents were asked broadly about their experiences of deployment rather than deeply about coparenting specifically. As a result, important aspects of coparenting during deployment may not be captured here. Further, the study relies on retrospective accounts which are subject to recall bias. Longitudinal studies, with data collected during each phase of the deployment cycle, would reduce the reliance on participants' memories

of past events as well as the possibility that participants' reports of past coparenting are influenced by their current coparenting.

The sampling used in this small study limits its generalizability. As noted, this study was conducted with a sample drawn primarily from the National Guard and Reserve, which differs substantially from Active Duty populations in terms of training, expectations, military culture, and experience with combat-related deployment. In addition, the majority of parents were in committed couple relationships; thus, we have virtually no data on coordinated caregiving among single service member parents, despite evidence of elevated risk and complexity within this group (Vaughn-Coaxum, Smith, Iverson, & Vogt, 2015). Further, growing research suggests that coparenting configurations extend beyond biological parents or married couples to include a variety of coparents such as grandparents, step parents or nonkin coparents (McHale, 2011; McHale & Irace, 2011). In order to more fully understand coparenting processes for military families with young children, future research should encompass families representing the diversity of families based on military affiliation, family structure, and parenting constellations. Caregivers who are not the child's legal guardians are frequently involved as coparents, especially during deployment, and their perspectives must be explored in future research.

Implications for Practice

Coparenting has been identified as a modifiable risk variable that can be targeted in prevention and intervention efforts currently aimed at individual parenting skills (Feinberg, 2003). In our view, consideration of coparenting processes is also critical for parenting and family based programs for military service members with very young children. Beginning in predeployment, programs that support parents to be intentional in preparing for the hurdles of separation have potential to prevent misunderstandings and personalization, enhance family communication, and ease service member reentry following deployment. Supports for home front parents as they take on the daunting realities of "single parenting" can be anticipated in advance of the service member's departure (White, DeBurgh, Fear, & Iverson, 2011). In addition, parents may put in place family routines (Fiese, 2006) that can be maintained regardless of the service member's status in the deployment cycle. Rituals that reinforce family cohesiveness and flexibility, and the enduring importance of an absent parent, can strengthen a young child's sense of security and safety even when a parent is deployed (Acker, Nicholson, & DeVoe, 2019; Rogers-Baber, 2017).

Concern about the impact of deployment separation on service member's relationships with their children, especially their infants and toddlers who were preverbal, weighed heavily on the minds of service members. Very real worries emerged about how the deployed parent's role could be maintained during the absence, the nature and frequency of communication with the parent in theater, and whether a young child would recognize and accept the returning parent. For very young children whose communication with and about the absent parent must be facilitated, supportive covert parenting practices appeared to be effective in maintaining connection and familiarity over the distance. Affirmation of the deployed parent's importance and continued role in the family can reassure young children within the ambiguous context of parental absence due to deployment (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007).

During the postdeployment period, prevention and intervention efforts provide a touchpoint for reintegration when most parents will reexamine child-related roles, reaffirm the coparental alliance, and reestablish coparenting closeness in the case of couples. Home front parents and service members alike described a range of readiness to reengage in parenting together, an issue that can be openly discussed with a practitioner. Issues of pacing in relation to child developmental gains and readiness, and respect for routines established by the home front parent were salient themes among parents in our sample. Developmental guidance combined with hands-on help from the home front parent is useful, especially when a returning parent lacks confidence in their parenting abilities or does not yet understand the developmental growth their children have attained. Service members managing deployment or combat-related emotional distress often needed time and space to reengage fully in their parenting and coparenting roles.

Because coparenting unfolds in relation to an individual child, it is also critical that practitioners support parents in identifying distinct interactions with each child that may be provocative for returning service members, especially in the context of parental PTSD (Sherman, Larsen, Straits-Troster, Erbes, & Tasse, 2015). In our clinical work, a relatively common report from service members was the experience of being triggered by typical aspects of daily life with young children, such as toddler exuberance, unexpected physical contact, and other sensory experiences inherent in healthy parent-child interactions. Supportive coparenting practices become especially critical under these circumstances in that the home front parent may need to intervene directly and swiftly, when a parent-child interaction escalates (Blankenship, DeVoe, Dondanville, Paris, & Acker, 2015). Furthermore, the home front parent can support children in understanding trauma-related distress in the returning parent to reduce children's fears and personalization of a parent's negative responses.

These qualitative findings contributed to the development and refinement of a reflective parenting program designed for military families with very young children (DeVoe, Paris, Emmert-Aronson, Ross, & Acker, 2017). Included in the intervention are activities focused on coparenting and communication plans, and building family routines and rituals that are independent of the caregiving constellation. For families preparing for an upcoming deployment, focused discussion sets the stage for positive coparenting during separation and upon reunion, to maintain the service member's "presence" in family life at home, and to support the service member reintegrate into the parenting role during the postdeployment adjustment period. Relatedly, postdeployment intervention integrates core principles of coparenting processes, including an exploration of how the couple works together as a parenting team, to what degree each parent supports and feels supported by the other in their parenting efforts, and where there is strain in roles and coordination. When coparenting adults have a strong sense of mutual commitment to raising children, are able to trust the other partner's abilities and judgment during separation, and communicate effectively, children of all ages can be well supported through cycles of parental absence.

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