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Military Children's Family Relationships

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Military Children's Family Relationships



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This material is based upon work supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Office of Military Family Readiness Policy, U.S. Department of Defense under Award Number 2019-48770-30366.

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What are some of the relationship challenges that military children experience?



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Today's Presenters



Shawn D. Whiteman, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies,
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Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D.
Distinguished Professor and Director,
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Learning Objectives

- Understand the history of military policies and their influence on the characteristics of the service force and military families
- Identify the demographics of children in military families
- Understand the challenges and resilience that children in military families demonstrate
- Identify how deployments shape children's adjustment directly and indirectly through the family environment

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A Brief History of Military Families



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Recent History of U.S. Military Programs and Policies about Families

- Prior to 1942, regulations prohibited men with wives or children from enlisting during peacetime (Albano, 1994)
- Financial support has been provided to widows and children of wounded or killed veterans since the 1600's (Aaronson, 1942)
- Financial support for families during military service began only in 1898 (Wickham, 1983)
- World War II was a turning point, because heads of households were drafted, requiring provision of support for families left at home (Albano, 1994)

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Recent History of U.S. Military Programs and Policies about Families

- Following the Korean war (1950s), service members' family concerns reduced military retention (Little, 1971)
- 70% of service members were unmarried (Albano, 1994)
- By 1960, spouses and children outnumbered service members in the military population (Albano, 1994)
- Army Community Service centers were developed in 1965, with other branches following suit 15 years later (Albano, 1994)
- Child care programs also were developed (Kamarck, 2020)
- Now, the largest employer-provided child development system in the U.S. (Kamarck, 2020)

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Recent History of U.S. Military Programs and Policies about Families

- All volunteer force post-Vietnam conflict (Albano, 1994)
 - Personnel served longer and the number of those with families rose
 - Service members and families became more diverse
 - Increase of single-parent families
- Regulations preventing service by married women ended in 1975 (Norwood & Ursano, 1994)
 - Proportion of female personnel rose from 2.5% in 1973 to 11% in 1991
 - Number of dual-military families increased as well



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What do you think?

What recent historical events will affect military families the most in the future?

How will families be affected?

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Military Families Today



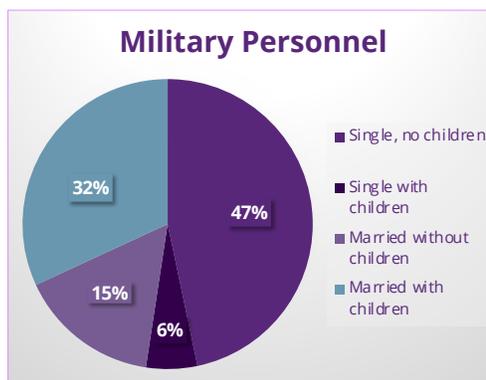
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Demographics on Military Children

Across Active Duty and Selected Reserve populations

- 2,129,777 military personnel
- 2,582,001 family members



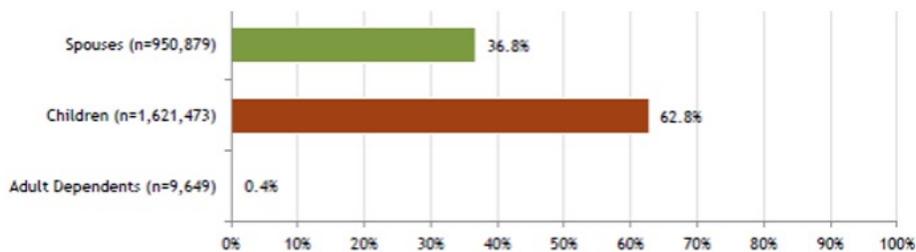
Department of Defense (2020)

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Demographics on Military Children

Almost 2/3 of total DoD family members are children and about 1/3 of family members are spouses (DoD, 2020)



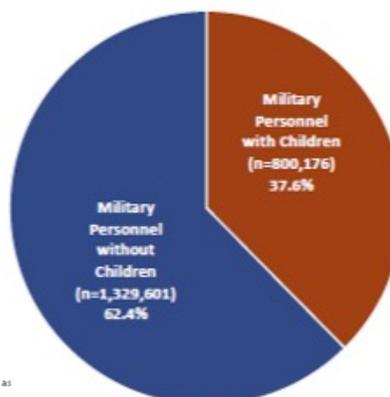
Note: Children include minor dependents age 20 or younger and dependents age 22 or younger enrolled as full-time students.
 Note: Displayed percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.
 Source: DMDC Active Duty Military Family File (September 2020); DMDC Reserve Components Family File (September 2020)

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Demographics on Military Children

- Today, among U.S. military personnel, 37.6% have children under the age of 22 years
- 1,621,473 children



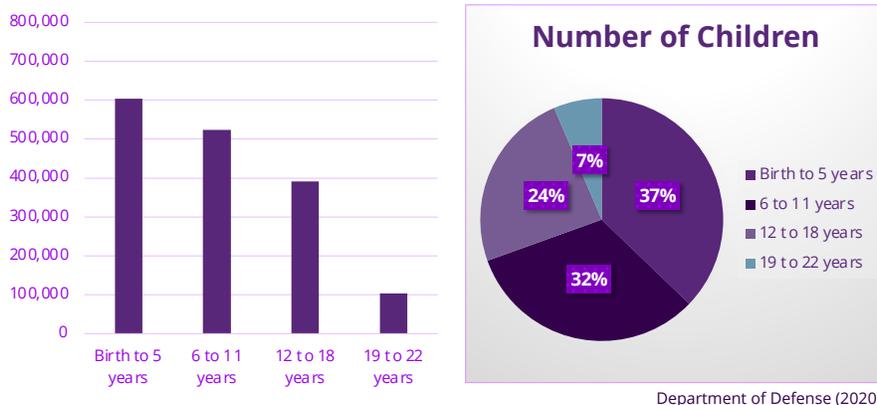
Note: Children include minor dependents age 20 or younger and dependents age 22 or younger enrolled as full-time students.
 Note: Displayed percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.
 Source: DMDC Active Duty Military Personnel Master File (September 2020); DMDC Active Duty Military Family File (September 2020); DMDC Reserve Components Common Personnel Data System (September 2020); DMDC Reserve Components Family File (September 2020)

Department of Defense (2020)

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Demographics on Military Children



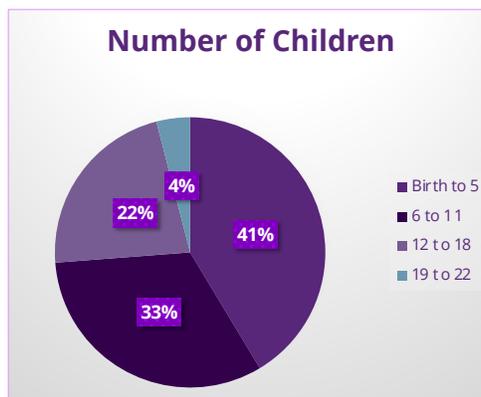
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Demographics on Military Children

Active Duty Members

- 1,333,822 active duty members
- 1,569,841 associated family members
- 964,485 children
 - Largest group of children is between birth and 5 years



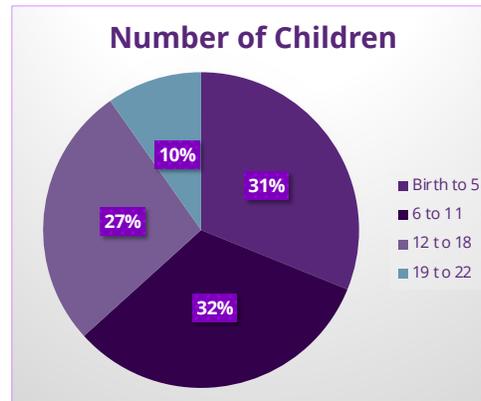
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Demographics on Military Children

Selected Reserve Members

- 802,248 Selected Reserve members
- 1,023,295 family members
- 664,026 children
 - Largest groups are between birth to 5 years and 6 to 11 years



Department of Defense (2020)

Share in the chat pod!



What data did you find surprising?

What would you like to learn more about?

Research on Military Children



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Pre-Quiz

Children from military families...		
Have higher rates of adjustment problems than children from community samples.	True	False
Demonstrate poorer adjustment because of more authoritarian military discipline.	True	False
Generally show positive growth following a parent's deployment.	True	False
The quality of the at-home parent's parenting is what determines child adjustment during deployments.	True	False

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Historical Research on Military Children

- Early research focused on potential developmental problems and challenges among children
- "The most striking finding of this survey is the extraordinary toughness of the child, and his flexibility in adapting to potentially threatening situations" (Bodman, 1941; p. 488).



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Historical Research on Military Children

"Military Family Syndrome"

- Idea that overly authoritarian military discipline and frequent relocations and separations yielded poorer adjustment among military children (LaGrone, 1978)

Comparisons of military children and civilian populations suggest:

- "no consistent differences that would support the notion that military youth have more difficulties than their civilian peers during adolescence" (Leitzel & Zaler, 1999, p. 184).

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Research on Military Children and Families Since 2000



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Cycle of Deployment

- Increased focus on the cycle of deployment
(DeVoe & Ross, 2012; Pincus et al., 2001)

Pre-Deployment

- Anticipation of loss vs. denial
- Training/long hours away
- Getting affairs in order
- Mental and physical distance
- Arguments

Deployment

- Navigate changing demands and roles
- Mixed emotions
- Disoriented/overwhelmed

Reunion and Reintegration

- Period of ambivalence
- "Honeymoon" followed by assimilation to an adapted system

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Deployments and Children's Health and Adjustment



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Large Scale Studies

Millennium Cohort Family Study (Fairbank et al., 2018)

- Although most children were functioning well, parental deployment with combat exposure was associated with increased clinical diagnoses among children

RAND Deployment Life Study (Meadows et al., 2016)

- General resilience of military families, but found some elevated psychological symptoms among younger children and strained relationships with the deployed parent among teens after reintegration

Meta-Analyses (Card et al., 2011; Cunitz et al., 2019)

- Parents' military deployments are linked with increased maladjustment among offspring, though the effects are generally small-to-moderate in size

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Indiana Youth Survey

Fig. 7.1a
Predicted Probability of Considering Suicide by Parental Separation (n=72,429)

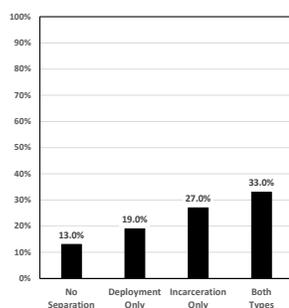
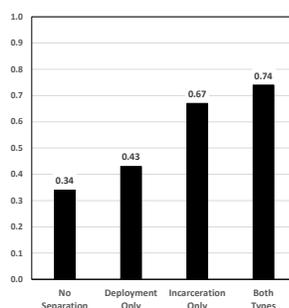


Fig. 7.1b
Average Skipped Days Past Month by Parental Separation (n=71,243)



MacDermid Wadsworth et al. (2022)

Mechanisms Linking Deployment to Children's Health and Adjustment



Attachment

Deployments may disrupt at-home parents' and children's attachment relationships with the deployed parent.

- Barker and Berry (2009) found that young children with a deployed parent showed:
 - Increased behavior problems during deployment
 - More insecure attachment behaviors
- At reunion and reintegration: (Huebner et al., 2007)
 - Most young children (~66%) adjusted quickly and reestablished patterns of attachment with deployed parent
 - Other children, show disrupted attachment behavior patterns and persistent behavior problems for longer than one month

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Mental Health

Deployments shape children's adjustment through the non-deployed parent's mental health.

- During deployment:
 - At-home parents may experience increases in depression, anxiety, and sleep difficulties (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2010)
 - At-home parents' mental health is associated with child adjustment (Allen et al., 2010)

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Parenting

Deployments may dampen at-home parents' parenting.

- During deployment, at-home parents at high risk for:
 - High stress parenting (Flake et al., 2009)
 - Less sensitive parenting (Paley et al., 2013)

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Mental Health and/or Parenting?

(O'Grady et al., 2018)

Table 2. Multilevel Model Results Estimating Changes in Parents' Responsiveness and Depressive Symptoms as a Function of Time Across the Deployment Cycle (N = 112)

Fixed effect	Responsiveness		Depressive symptoms	
	γ	SE	γ	SE
Intercept	4.020***	0.178	7.445***	1.858
Number of deployments	-0.033	0.039	0.107	0.425
At-home parents' gender	0.317	0.174	1.420	1.841
At-home parents' education	-0.038	0.025	0.066	0.266
Deployed parents' pay grade	0.001	0.001	-0.015	0.015
Child age	-0.028**	0.009	-0.032	0.100
Child gender	-0.009	0.077	1.285	0.849
At-home parents' race	-0.099	0.138	-0.241	1.468
Linear time	-0.002**	0.001	0.161**	0.029
Quadratic time	-	-	-0.003**	0.001

Note. Convergence criterion = 0.001. At-home parents' education, deployed parents' military grade, and child age were centered at their means, respectively.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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Mental Health and/or Parenting?

(O'Grady et al., 2018)

Table 4. Multilevel Model Results Predicting Changes in Children's Externalizing Behaviors and Internalizing Symptoms as a Function of Time and Changes in Parents' Responsiveness and Depressive Symptoms Across the Deployment Cycle (N = 111)

Fixed effect	Externalizing		Internalizing	
	γ	SE	γ	SE
Intercept	0.537**	0.173	0.769***	0.183
Number of deployments	0.006	0.037	0.000	0.039
At-home parents' gender	0.223	0.170	-0.018	0.180
At-home parents' education	0.008	0.024	-0.001	0.025
Deployed parents' pay grade	-0.001	0.001	-0.001	0.001
Child age	-0.007	0.009	0.009	0.010
Child gender	-0.052	0.075	0.045	0.079
At-home parents' race	-0.093	0.131	-0.122	0.134
Linear time	0.005	0.003	-0.001	0.001
Quadratic time	-0.000	0.000	-	-
BP at-home parents' responsiveness	-0.224*	0.094	-0.054	0.099
WP at-home parents' responsiveness	-0.299***	0.083	-0.278**	0.084
BP at-home parents' depressive symptoms	0.020*	0.009	0.026**	0.009
WP at-home parents' depressive symptoms	0.006	0.005	-0.004	0.005

Note. Convergence criterion=0.001. At-home parents' education, deployed parents' military grade, and child age were centered at their means, respectively. BP parental warmth and BP parents' depressive symptoms denotes Level 2 ("between-person"; grand mean centered). WP at-home parents' warmth and WP at-home parents' depressive symptoms denotes Level 1 ("within-person"; person mean centered). BP = between person; WP = within-person.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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Maltreatment

Deployment and child maltreatment

- Some evidence for positive association between parental deployment and cases of child maltreatment (Gibbs et al., 2007; Rentz et al., 2007)

Must attend to preexisting conditions within families

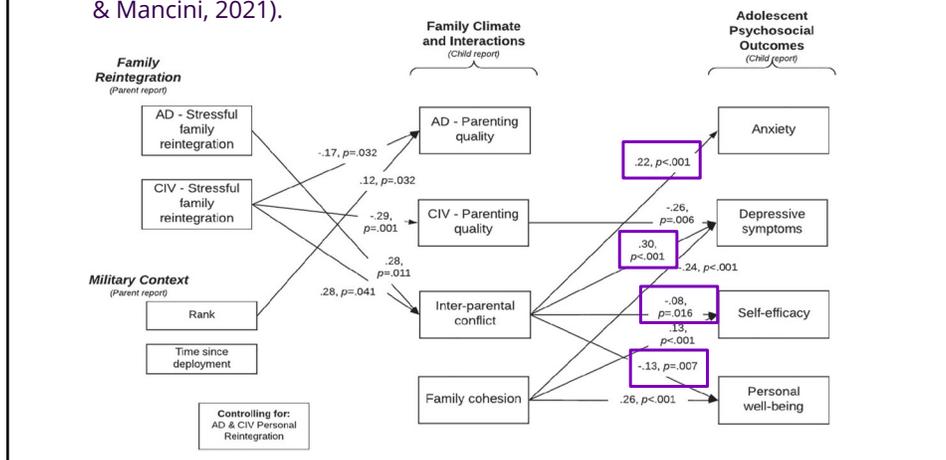


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Inter-Parental Conflict

Inter-parental conflict during reintegration is associated with increased internalizing and decreased well-being among military children (O'Neal & Mancini, 2021).



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Sibling Relationships

More than 80% of youth grow up in homes with siblings (McHale et al., 2012)

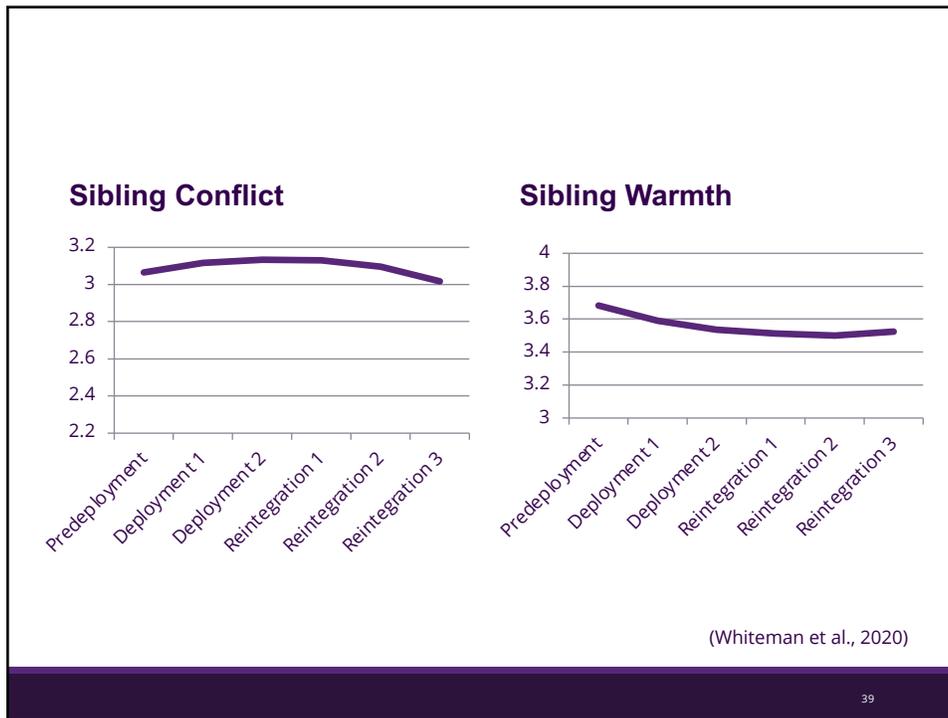
- Military personnel with children average 2 children (DoD, 2020)

Sibling relationship qualities are associated with youth's adjustment above and beyond the effects of parenting and shared environments

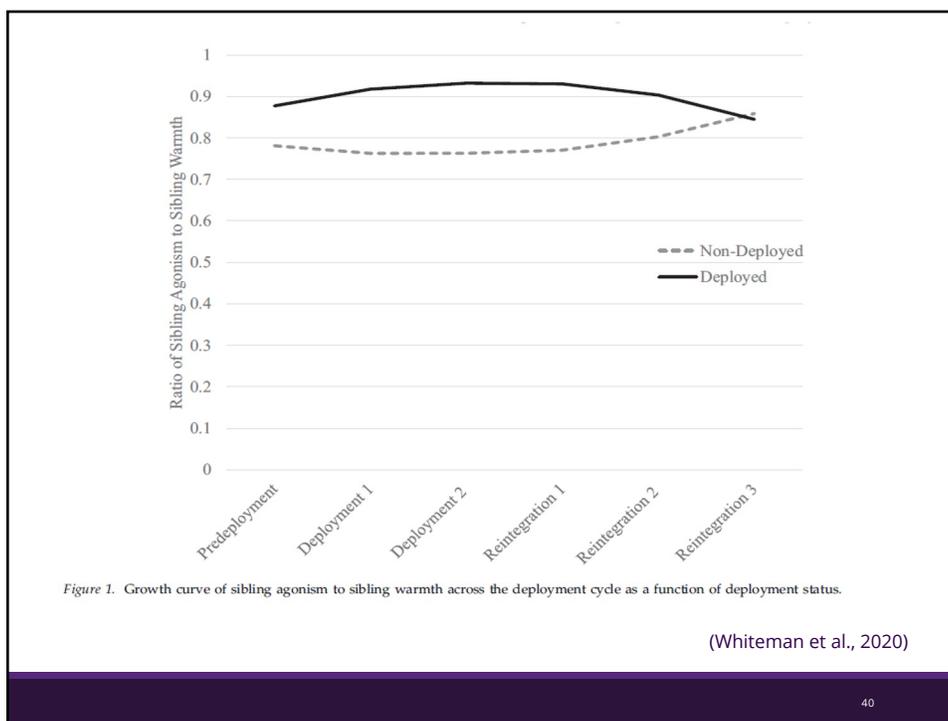


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Table 3
Multilevel Model Results Predicting Perceived Changes in Youth's Externalizing Behaviors as a Function of Time, Perceived Changes in Sibling Agonism Relative to Warmth, Changes in Parental Acceptance and Mental Health, Across the Deployment Cycle

Fixed effect	<i>g</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Intercept	1.7575***	.2258	
At-home parents' education	-0.0301	.0173	-.106
Service members' military pay grade	-0.0001	.0009	-.004
Service members' number of deployments	-0.0005	.0025	.007
Youth age	-0.0013	.0071	-.012
Youth gender (0 = male; 1 = female)	-0.0784*	.0359	-.089
Birth order (0 = older, 1 = younger)	0.0975*	.0372	.110
Gender composition of the sibling dyad (0 = same-gender; 1 = mixed-gender)	-0.0249	.0574	.028
Siblings' age spacing	0.0018	.0123	.009
At-home parents' acceptance	-0.1732***	.0418	-.190
At-home parents' depressive symptoms	0.0046	.0037	.054
Time (in weeks; linear)	0.0012	.0012	.104
Time (in weeks) squared (quadratic)	0.0000	.0000	-.103
BP sibling warmth	-0.0619***	.0825	.040
BP ratio of sibling agonism to warmth	0.5447***	.1454	.360
WP ratio of sibling agonism to warmth	0.2522**	.0917	.084
Deployment status (0 = not deployed; 1 = deployed)	-0.0336	.0691	.038

(Whiteman et al., 2020)

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Post-Quiz

Children from military families...		
Have higher rates of adjustment problems than children from community samples.	True	False
Demonstrate poorer adjustment because of more authoritarian military discipline.	True	False
Generally show positive growth following a parent's deployment.	True	False
The quality of the at-home parent's parenting is what determines child adjustment during deployments.	True	False

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Key Takeaways

1. Military deployments shape at-home parents' and children's well-being.
2. In many cases, effects of individual deployments are short-lived.
3. Children's exposures to military-connected challenges can accumulate, however.
4. Effects of deployment may vary across the various stages of the deployment cycle.
5. Entire family system contributes to children's well-being – during deployments, at-home parents' behavior is especially important.

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Share in the chat pod!



Share examples from your work with military families that support “or dispute” the research shared.

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Application



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Share in the chat pod!

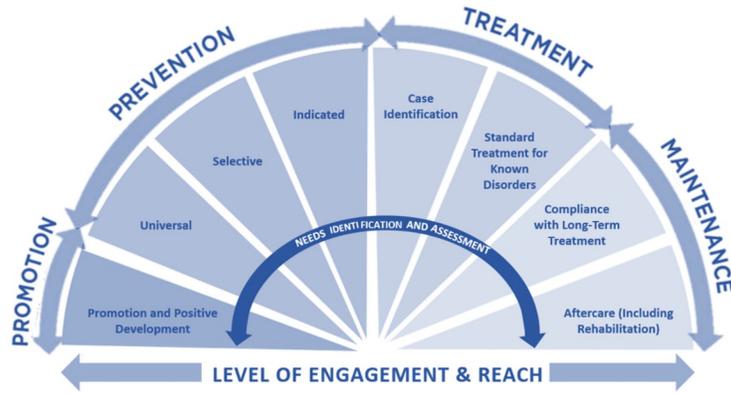


What resources and support do military children/families need?

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Opportunities for Support



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How can we best get children and families what they need when they need it (i.e., promotion, prevention, treatment, etc.)?

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Opportunities for Support

	Family Level	Resilience Processes Targeted for Prevention/Intervention	EBP Intervention Examples
<p>Military Family Stressors</p> <p>Parental psychopathology: PTSD, depression, substance use</p> <p>Child abuse and neglect (maltreatment)</p> <p>Death of a parent</p> <p>Physical injury</p> <p>Intimate partner violence</p> <p>Child mental health problems</p>	Individual stress regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual treatment to remit symptoms and prevent deterioration that includes the family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence-based individual treatments Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)
	Parent-child relational processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective parenting practices: attachment, reflective capacity, warmth, structure, encouragement, discipline, problem-solving, communication, monitoring (middle childhood and adolescence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family Advocacy Program New Parents Support Program Strong Families, Strong Forces Strong Military Families ADAPT FOCUS Families – Early Childhood Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)
	Couple-relational processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective relationships, problem solving, co-parenting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong Bonds Strength at Home FOCUS – Couples Cognitive-behavioral couple therapy for PTSD
	Overall family processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family level practices Individual and interpersonal skill development: communication, emotional regulation, problem-solving, goal setting, management of trauma and loss reminders, narrative reflection/shared meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FOCUS – Couples and Families Family Focused Therapy for TBI Family Bereavement Program

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Share in the chat pod!



Which Evidence-Based Practices do you have experience with?

Which have you seen be most helpful?

Share in the chat pod!



Identify potential community partners
you can collaborate with to support
children, youth, families, caregivers.

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Thank You

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Upcoming Event



The Relationship Changes of Military Couples During Reintegration

Thursday, May 12, 2022

This webinar will explore the findings of an 8-month longitudinal study of 555 military couples during the reintegration period. Based on these findings, recommendations for prevention and intervention services designed to help military couples negotiate relationship changes across the post-deployment transition will be discussed.

Continuing education credit will be available for this session!

OneOp.org/event/111940

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JUNE 2022

Join us to explore and understand social justice so you can identify barriers that impact a family's health and well-being.

You'll also gain a better understanding of how you can become a front-line social justice advocate!



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OneOp.org/MFRA/SocialJustice

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Continuing Education



This webinar has been approved for the following continuing education (CE) credits:

- 1.5 CEs for social work, licensed professional counselors and family therapists
- 1.5 contact hours for Certified Family Life Educators (CFLEs)
- Certificate of attendance

Evaluation Link

Go to the event page for the evaluation and post-test link.

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Questions?

Email Anita Harris Hering at OneOpFamilyTransitions@gmail.com

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Topics of Interest

- Helping professionals and families build resilience
- Navigating life cycle transitions





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