The Unique Challenges of Military Families

Center for Deployment Psychology
Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Agenda

- Demographics of Military Families
- Military Family Life
- The Deployment Cycle
- Military Marriages
- Military BRATs
- Risk & Resiliency
- Resources
Demographics of Military Families

“When one person joins the military the whole family serves.”

Family Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military Personnel (n=2,228,348)</th>
<th>42.1%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Members (n=3,066,717)</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marital Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Force Marital Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married to Civilian (n=1,062,700)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single (n=1,056,112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dual Military (n=109,536)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Military Families

- Dependents
  - Spouse
  - Children
  - Stepchildren
  - Same-Sex Spouses*
- Non-Dependents
  - Parents
  - Siblings
  - Extended family
  - Adult children

Age of Military Children

Active Duty
- 19 to 22: 4.4%
- 12 to 18: 22.4%
- 6 to 11: 30.8%
- 0 to 5: 42.4%

Selected Reserve
- 19 to 22: 11.9%
- 12 to 18: 28.1%
- 6 to 11: 29.7%
- 0 to 5: 29.3%

Military Marriages

“If the Navy wanted you to have a wife, they would have issued you one.”

Unique attributes of military marriages:

- When the military calls, the Service Member must go
- Separation is standard
- Reunification is also a normal occurrence
- Separation from family/friends is common

Marriage and Divorce in the Military

- Marriage/divorce rates
- Young marriages
- Marital quality
- Infidelity

The Good and Bad of Long Distance Relationships

Good
- Equivalent relationship satisfaction
- No greater risk of infidelity
- Often successful despite difficulties and distance
- Increased resilience and sense of self-efficacy

Bad
- Mild depression common
- Tendency to isolate
- Difficult to communicate
- Difficult to maintain connection

Impact of Deployment on Couples

Evidence-Based Couples Counseling in the DoD/VA
- Gottman Method Couples Therapy
  - http://www.gottman.com
  - http://csf.army.mil
- Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples (EFT)
  - http://www.iceft.com
  - http://www.strongbonds.org
- Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy (IBCT)
  - http://www.ibct.psych.ucla.edu
  - http://drandrewchristensen.com

Gottman’s Basic Tenets
Happy Marriages
- Based on deep friendship
- Use of repair attempts
- Shared sense of deep meaning
- Most marital arguments cannot be resolved

Gottman & Silver (1999)
Gottman’s “Sound Relationship House” Theory

- Manage Conflict
- The Positive Perspective
- Turn Towards Instead of Away
- Share Fondness & Admiration
- Build “Love Maps”

Commitment

- Make Life Dreams Come True
- Create Shared Meaning

Trust

- Male Life
- Dreams Come True

Gottman & Gottman (2008); Stanley (2013); http://www.gottmanblog.com

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

- Criticism
- Contempt
- Defensiveness
- Stonewalling

Gottman & Gottman (2008); WRAIR (2011)

Military Family Life

“Military families are families with unique challenges.”

Impact of Military Culture

- Following Orders
- Leadership
- Communication Style
- “Mission First”

Devries et al. (2012)
Both the military and families demand:

- Commitment
- Loyalty
- Time
- Energy

### Family Stressors

- **Normative**
  - Occur for most families
  - Expected

- **Normative Military**
  - Occur for most military families
  - Expected

- **Catastrophic**
  - Do not occur to most families
  - Unexpected

### Normative Stressors of Military Family Life

- Frequent relocations (PCS)
- Spouse employment opportunities
- Separations
- Deployments
- Risk of injury or death

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*If you knew you had to move your entire household every 2-3 years, how would you live your life differently than you do now?*
The Deployment Cycle

Emotional Cycle of Deployment

MilSpouse Cycle of Deployment

Parenting Cycle of Deployment

Pincus et al. (2001)

Patricia Santiago (2010)

DeVoe & Ross (2012)
Pre-Deployment Stage

“A holding pattern during which life cannot yet begin.”

DeVoe & Ross (2012)

Emotional Reactions

Parenting

- Looking Ahead
  - How/when to communicate with children about impending departure
  - Handling feelings & responding to children
- Saying Goodbye
  - Importance of saying goodbye face-to-face

DeVoe & Ross (2012)

Helping Families

- Facilitate communication
  - Sharing of feelings
  - Discussion of expectations
- Foster connection
- Teach positive coping skills
- Emphasize the importance of support
- Help couples address practical issues
- Discuss parenting issues

Pavlicin (2003); Pines et al. (2004)
Themes for Therapy

• Affective Education
• Exploring Roles
• Exploring Unresolved Conflicts
• Expectations of Fidelity

Deployment Stage

“Repeat after me ... I can do this.”

Emotional Reactions

• Deployment
  – Disorientation, mixed emotions
  – Relief that anticipation is over
• Sustainment
  – Self-growth, independence
  – Less angry, but lonelier
• Re-Deployment (Anticipation of Return)
  – Excitement, apprehension

Parenting

• Parenting from the Home Front
  – Increased responsibilities = increased stress
• Parenting from a War Zone
  – Relinquishment of daily involvement
  – Adaptation of new strategies
• Surviving the Home Stretch
  – How will children respond to reunion?
Impact of Deployment on Children

- Emotional / Behavioral Difficulties
- Cumulative Months of Deployment
- Child Maltreatment

Signs of Distress in Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Behaviors</th>
<th>Moods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infants</td>
<td>Change in eating/sleeping</td>
<td>Listlessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toddlers</td>
<td>Crying, tantrums</td>
<td>Irritability, sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Schoolers</td>
<td>Clinginess, potty accidents</td>
<td>Irritability, sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Age Children</td>
<td>Body aches, whining, problems at school</td>
<td>Irritability, sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescents</td>
<td>Isolation, drug use</td>
<td>Anger, apathy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Helping Families

- Facilitate setting personal goals
- Encourage creation of a support network
- Teach stress management techniques
- Highlight the importance of self-care

Themes for Therapy

- Deployment: Stress Reduction
- Sustainment: Resilience & Growth
- Re-Deployment: Expectation Management
**Post-Deployment Stage**

"Hello, Stranger. Let's cohabit and raise these kids."

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**Emotional Reactions**

- Reunion
  - Elation
  - Relief
  - Frustration

- Reintegration
  - Tension
  - Resentment
  - Comfort

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**Parenting**

- Facing Reality
  - Reconnect & rebuild parent-child relationships
  - Role negotiation / co-parenting challenges

- Moving Forward
  - Re-establish equilibrium
  - Develop new routines
  - Incorporate legacy of deployment

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**Reintegration Challenges**

- Families
  - New routines / responsibilities
  - Loss of independence
  - "Walking on eggshells"
  - Things are not perfect

- Service Members
  - Make meaning of deployment
  - Grieve loss of friends
  - Acclimate to civilian life
  - Re-adjust to being a spouse/parent

- SM will seem different
- Family will seem different
- Feelings of resentment
- Role/boundary re-negotiation
Facilitating Successful Reunions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Member’s Expectations</th>
<th>Partner’s Expectations</th>
<th>Therapist’s Role (how to help)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isolate vs. great sex 24/7</td>
<td>Fairy-tale reunion</td>
<td>Set realistic expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate return to “old ways”</td>
<td>New routines</td>
<td>Remind that adjustment takes time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated from family</td>
<td>Earned a break</td>
<td>Stress that both made sacrifices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one understands</td>
<td>Drill with questions</td>
<td>Teach communication skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Military OneSource (2012); Parkinson (2003)

Themes for Therapy

- Revisiting Family Roles
- Opening Communication
- Creating Opportunities for Appreciation and Caring

Laser & Stephens (2012)

Normative Military Stressors for Children

- Relocation
- Child Care
- Education
- Deployments

Bloume et al. (2012)
**Resiliency in Military Children**

- Sense of belonging/community
- Adaptable
- Tolerant of diversity
- Responsible/independent
- Respect for authority

*Easterbrooks et al. (2013); Hall (2012); Park (2011)*

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**Helping Children: Pre-Deployment**

- Encourage quality time with each child
- Emphasize honesty
- Help parents provide reassurance
- Foster connection
- Create communication plan
- Facilitate conversations with schools/teachers

*Easterbrooks et al. (2013); Hall (2012); Park (2011)*

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**Helping Children: Deployment**

- Encourage consistency & routine
- Highlight the importance of support from other adults
- Help parents model self-care
- Facilitate good communication
- Emphasize the importance of fun
- Remind parents to let kids be kids

*Hall (2008); Pavlicin (2003)*

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**Successful Reunions with Children**

**Things to remember:**

- Children react differently to homecoming depending on their age & relationship with deployed parent
- Children are often loyal to the parent that stays behind
- Children may feel anxious about the Service Member leaving again
- Children will wonder if rules at home will change

*Pavlicin (2003); Pincus et al. (2001)*

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Infant/Toddler Development

• A time of rapid growth and development
  – Physical
  – Cognitive (language skills)
• Attachment is a major milestone

Reunion & Reintegration: Infants/Toddlers

• "Stranger Reaction"
• Increased sensitivity
• Crying, clinging, disrupted schedule
• Delayed milestones
• Temper tantrums
• Nightmares
• Regression in skills

Pre-Schooler Development

• Growth/development continue at a rapid pace
• The child’s perception is that everything revolves around him/her
• Magical thinking predominates

Reunion & Reintegration: Pre-Schoolers

• Personalize stress
• Regression in skills
• Acting out
• Time to warm up

Derenne (2008); Photo: http://www.morguefile.com
School Age Child Development

- Physical development slows
- The child begins to find his/her place in the world
  - Mastery in academics, athletics, art
  - Negotiation of status in the peer group
- Increased organization, responsibility, cognitive and moral development
  - Logical thinking, empathy, respect for rules

Reunion & Reintegration: School Age Children

- Whiny, aggressive, irritable
- Need time to talk
- Need physical attention
- Rapid mood shifts
- Excitement
- Fear

- Slowly transition roles/responsibilities
- Include Service Member in routines
- One-on-one time
- Connect to school/community resources

Adolescent Development

- Puberty
- Increased reliance on peer group to determine norms
  - Separation/individuation
- Capable of abstract thinking
- Common to have parent/child tension

Reunion & Reintegration: Adolescents

- Emotionally guarded
- Acting out
- Lower grades
- Relief
- Concern about roles/responsibilities
- Sensitivity

- Open communication
- Consistency
- Transition roles/responsibilities
- One-on-one time
- Respect privacy
Risk & Resiliency

“Semper Gumby”

Deployment Risk Factors

- Rigid coping style
- History of family dysfunction/behavioral health problems
- Families experiencing first military separation
- New to duty location
- Young families
- Pregnant spouses
- Single parent families
- Dual military families
- Families with foreign spouses
- Blended families
- Selected Reserve Families

Blended Families

- Children of different developmental ages and stages
- Higher risk of emotional/behavioral problems
- Torn between biological parents
- Two households
- Issues of isolation

Selected Reserve Families

- Exist primarily within civilian community
- Isolated from traditional military culture, support, and resources
- Possible financial challenges
- Employment concerns
- Changes in health care
- Yellow Ribbon Program

References:
Blount et al. (1992); Darwin (2012); Hall (2008); Huffman & Payne (2006); Kelley (2006); Weins & Boss (2000); Wolpert et al. (2000).
LGB Families

- 20 September 2011 = Repeal of DADT
- 26 June 2013 = Repeal of Section 3 of DOMA

- Prejudice/Discrimination
- Identity Concealment
- Relocation Issues
- Social Support

The Impact of Mental Health Issues

- Depression, PTSD
- Caregiver Burden
- “As goes the parent, so goes the child”

Keys to Family Resilience

- Family Belief Systems
  - Making meaning of adversity
  - Positive outlook
  - Transcendence & spirituality

- Family Organizational Patterns
  - Flexibility
  - Connectedness
  - Social & economic resources

- Family Communication Processes
  - Clarity
  - Open emotional expression
  - Collaborative problem solving

Family Belief Systems

- Viewing crises as a shared challenges
- Normalize/contextualize distress
- Hope, optimism
- Affirmation of strengths
- Making the best of available options
- Connection with cultural/religions traditions

Photo: Ms. Britney L. Walker, Army Medicine

Blasure et al. (2012); Blow et al. (2013); Fiske et al. (2000); Goff et al. (2007); Lester et al. (2010);
Sayers et al. (2009); Tsvetanov et al. (2012). Photo: http://www.army.mil

Photo: http://www.madison.va.gov

Walsh (2006)
Family Organizational Patterns

- Adaptive change
- Stability through disruptions
- Authoritative leadership
- Support/collaboration
- Respect for individual needs
- Connection to kin/social networks
- Financial security

Walsh (2006)

Family Communication Processes

- Clear, consistent messages
- Sharing of information
- Open communication
- Mutual trust, empathy, and tolerance
- Creative brainstorming
- Shared decision-making/conflict resolution
- Preparing for future challenges

Walsh (2006)

Deployment Resiliency Factors

- Family readiness
- Active coping styles
- “Making meaning” of the deployment
- Strong community of social support
- Acceptance of military lifestyle
- Optimism
- Self-reliance
- Ability to adopt flexible gender roles

Hammer et al. (2006); Patterson & McCubbin (1984); Rosen et al. (1993); Walsh (2006); Weins & Boss (2006)

Resiliency Skills

Mind-Body Skills

Cognitive Skills

Communication Skills

Bowles et al. (2012)
**Mind-Body Skills**

Strengthen the ability to manage stress and intense emotions

- Breathing Exercises
- Yoga
- Mindfulness
- Meditation
- Guided Imagery

**Cognitive Skills**

- Identification of faulty/unhelpful ways of thinking (*cognitive distortions*)
  - Mind reading
  - “Should” statements
  - Labeling
- Development of alternative, more realistic thoughts (*cognitive reframing*)
- Changes in thoughts can lead to changes in behaviors and in emotion.

**Communication Skills**

Help resolve problems and maintain connection

- Speaker-Listener Technique
- Gentle Startups
- Avoid the “Four Horsemen”
- Use of Repair Attempts
- Give compliments
- Foster friendship

**Resources**
Department of Defense
2012 Demographics Profile of the Military Community

http://www.militaryonesource.mil/
Search for “Reports”

Resources

• After Deployment: http://www.afterdeployment.org/
• Families Overcoming Under Stress (FOCUS): http://www.focusproject.org/
• Military Child Education Coalition: http://www.militarychild.org/
• Military Family Research Institute: https://www.mfri.purdue.edu/
• Military Kids Connect: https://militarykidsconnect.org/
• Military One Source: http://www.militaryonesource.mil/
• Military Partners & Families Coalition: http://www.milpfc.org/
• Military Youth Deployment Support Resources & Videos: http://bit.ly/1bveHEh
• Real Warriors: http://www.realwarriors.net/
• Talk, Listen, Connect: http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/tlc
• Yellow Ribbon Program: http://www.yellowribbon.mil/
• Zero to Three: http://www.zerotothree.org/

Military OneSource

• Confidential services available via telephone & online
• Comprehensive information on every aspect of military life:
  – Deployment
  – Reunion
  – Relationships
  – Grief
  – Spouse employment & education
  – Parenting & childhood

FOUCS: Families Overcoming Under Stress

• Training in core resilience skills
  – Emotion regulation
  – Communication
  – Problem solving
  – Goal-setting
  – Managing deployment reminders
• FOCUS World (online resiliency training)
• FOCUS On the Go! (mobile app)
FOCUS World

- Online community for military children (ages 6-17)
- Access to age-appropriate resources to support children dealing with the challenges of military life
- Additional resources for parents & teachers

Military Kids Connect

- DVDs: Deployment, Homecomings, Grieving
- Website: Military Families Near & Far
- Mobile Apps:
  - Sesame Street for Military Families
  - The Big Moving Adventure

Sesame Street Toolkit: Talk, Listen, Connect

- Forums, online community for military kids
- Access to resources to support kids dealing with the challenges of military life
- Additional resources for parents & teachers
Features include:

- Descriptions and schedules of upcoming training events
- Blog updated daily with a range of relevant content
- Articles by subject matter experts related to deployment psychology, including PTSD, mTBI, depression, and insomnia
- Other resources and information for behavioral health providers
- Links to CDP’s Facebook page and Twitter feed

The following online courses are located on the CDP website at:

http://www.deploymentpsych.org/content/online-courses

NOTE: All of these courses can be taken for free or for CE Credits for a fee

- Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) for PTSD in Veterans and Military Personnel (1.25 CE Credits)
- Prolonged Exposure Therapy for PTSD in Veterans and Military Personnel (1.25 CE Credits)
- Epidemiology of PTSD in Veterans: Working with Service Members and Veterans with PTSD (1.5 CE Credits)
- Provider Resiliency and Self-Care: An Ethical Issue (1 CE Credit)
- Military Cultural Competence (1.25 CE Credits)
- The Impact of Deployment and Combat Stress on Families and Children, Part 1 (2.25 CE Credits)
- The Impact of Deployment and Combat Stress on Families and Children, Part 2 (1.75 CE Credits)
- The Fundamentals of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) (1.5 CE Credits)
- Identification, Prevention, & Treatment of Suicidal Behavior in Service Members & Veterans (2.25 CE Credits)
- Depression in Service Members and Veterans (1.25 CE Credits)

All of these courses and several others are contained in the Serving Our Veterans Behavioral Health Certificate program, which also includes 20 hours of Continuing Education Credits for $350.

Provider Support

CDP’s “Provider Portal” is exclusively for individuals trained by the CDP in evidence-based psychotherapies (e.g., CPT, PE, and CBT-I)

Features include:

- Consultation message boards
- Hosted consultation calls
- Printable fact sheets, manuals, handouts, and other materials
- FAQs and one-on-one interaction with answers from SMEs
- Videos, webinars, and other multimedia training aids

Participants in CDP’s evidence-based training will automatically receive an email instructing them how to activate their user name and access the “Provider Portal” section at Deploymentpsych.org.

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