
By Mark C. Pisano
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Military Deployment: How School Psychologists Can Help

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Nearly 700,000 children have at least one parent in the U. S. National Guard or Reserve (Our Military Kids, 2007). These children are in civilian schools, very possibly in buildings where you work! Some could be experiencing their parent's first deployment and feeling very alone and scared.

Military deployments have become more frequent for service members in the Guard and Reserves and are having a significant impact on the functioning of the service member's family and on their reintegration into civilian life. There are approximately 456,000 National Guard soldiers and 400,000 reserve soldiers. There are 205 National Guard posts across America with North Dakota being the only state without one. Every other state in the U.S. has at least one post but some have as many as 12. On military installations across the world, Department of Defense school psychologists deal constantly with deployment issues and the impact they have on children in the schools. Children who do not have easy access to a large installation, however, are especially vulnerable to emotional wounds because of the lack of access to base support networks. This is increasingly common in the war on terrorism with the important role played by the National Guard and Reserve whose families frequently do not live near military bases.

How school psychologists can help. Civilian school psychologists would be advised to find those students who have a parent deployed as a National Guard or Reserve service member. They may not be easy to find because of the strong sense of pride present in most service families. This culture of military families is probably strongest on military bases but very likely exists with Guard and Reserve families as well. Start with your teachers and ask them to let you know when they have a student of a service member. You can make a difference to that student and his or her family.

Predeployment and the Anticipation of Departure

The 82nd Airborne prides itself on being able to send a battalion of soldiers anywhere in the world within 24 hours! Notice for deployment can come months in advance or in only a few hours. Service members from the Guard and Reserve are being chosen individually based on their particular skill area often, without much notice, leaving the families distraught and unsure of where service members are going or when they will return. Whereas deployments for individual service members used to occur approximately every 20 months, now it is not unusual for the time between deployments to be only 8 months. No matter how much time the family has prior to deployment, the stress on service members and their families can be tremendous.

During this stage, it is common for family members to feel anger, sadness, fear, confusion, and nervousness as well as pride. Especially with a first-time deployment, fear is the overwhelming emotion. At times, the nondeployed spouse is feeling anger, often directed either at the military service or at the spouse who is going to be deployed. In addition, the family may be torn between trying to support the service member to be deployed and seeking family time together. As the service member is preparing for deployment, his/her time may be limited and the family may feel unimportant, and it is not unusual for marital discord to occur with the emotional distance created by the preparation for deployment. Some families report instances when the service member appears already "psychologically deployed" and the spouse feels as though "all this would be easier if he/she

just went ahead and left." There are some instances when a deployment takes place before the reintegration process from the previous deployment is finalized. It can seem like dad or mom is leaving again before he/she has actually had a chance to get comfortable with being back with the family from the last deployment.

How school psychologists can help. Try to encourage your families to develop a plan for taking care of the household and themselves. Talk with parents about sharing with their children information about the deployment and as much as they can about where they are going and what they will be doing there. With younger children, it may be helpful to show them on a map where the service member will be and tell them about the area: weather, food they will eat, who else will be there, how long they expect to be there. Children may be fearful during this stage and may wonder things such as: Will dad or mom be ok? Will I be ok? Who will protect our home (this is the most prominent fear in young children)?

Staying in contact during deployment can be tricky based on what access the service member will have to phones, computers, and mail. Make sure parents discuss and agree on how, how often, and at what times to communicate during the deployment and understand that there may be delays. Establish a goal to be able to send a letter or e-mail each day or once a week. Also encourage them to be realistic about how soon they can each expect to get a response.

During Deployment: Being Alone

Even though a parent is deployed, routine and consistency will be very important to maintain for the daily functioning of the family. During deployment, children are faced with experiences that are different from those of nonmilitary kids and that actually can foster maturity and help them learn the importance of flexibility in day-to-day life. Sometimes, extended family members move in to help with the children but most scenarios, however, find the nondeployed spouse alone doing the job of both mother and father. Raising a family alone is hard enough without the constant worry and uncertainty of the deployed loved one's safety. Daily and/or evening activities are often centered around an expected phone call that may or may not come, depending on the service member's situation. Nondeployed parents have often reported that the most difficult time of the day is that time right before bed when the father or mother is able to spend some alone time reading or telling a story to the child. The aloneness is felt by the nondeployed parent particularly when he or she is overwhelmed with all the responsibilities of running a household. Fundamentally, spouses are resilient and can cope, and there are instances when spouses can develop increased confidence in themselves during the deployment. Yet, the stress of frequent deployments may make it difficult to find the emotional strength that is required. During this stage, nondeployed spouses are frequently focused on CNN and other news channels trying to learn as much as possible about the area where the loved one is deployed. Happy and sad emotions flow quickly with the next breaking news. Children will be attuned to their parents' feelings, may see them crying, and wonder what is wrong.

How school psychologists can help. Some families have addressed the bedtime story problem with videotapes of the service member reading a book aloud "to the child." The child can follow along in the book as the parent reads on the videotape. This intervention has been very effective and is a favorite of the children. It is important to let parents know that in the child's mind no news is worse than bad news. Children need to know why their parent is upset without providing them with information they are developmentally unable to handle. Children do not need to know all the horrible details of a significant event but do need to know some basics so that they understand some of what is going on. Many times, children begin to have nightmares upon the parent's departure. One defense against nightmares is to put a pair of mommy's or daddy's shoes or boots under the bed as "protection." Families also consistently report that it is of great help to have the children keep a listing or calendar of events that can be shared with the parent when he/she returns. Record events with

photos and writing about games, classroom activities, report cards, milestones for babies, and anything else significant to the children.

The magical thinking of children is often hard to understand. Be sure parents know their children do not think it is their fault that the military parent is gone. There have been instances where children felt responsible for their parent being gone: "If only I'd had a better report card ..." or "If only I had done a better job with my chores, daddy or mommy would not have left." Help children understand that they have done nothing wrong and that they are needed.

Homecoming and the Adjustment Period

The return of the service member is generally a happy and hectic time. There are times when the military family member returns to a situation where things are in order at home and the reintegration is relatively smooth. There are other times, however, when the homecoming does not live up to the expectations, and resentment and hurt feelings take over. The difficulties and strains of return can be surprising and sometimes painfully disappointing to military families.

The service member's return changes what has been a set routine and prompts many questions from the children: Will everything be the same? Do they still need me? Will I be able to keep seeing my friends? Do they still love me? What will make them mad now? Elementary-age children may express intense anger as a way of keeping the returning parent at a distance at first, protecting him or herself from even more potential disappointment. Adolescents can have mood swings and will often have a mixed reaction over the days following the deployed parent's return. The adolescent will most likely be excited to see the parent again but could also be self-conscious about expressing too much emotion publicly and may be more concerned about acting cool in front of peers.

Repeated and ever-longer war-zone tours are putting increased pressure on military families, pushing military members' suicides to a record high ("Military Suicide Rate," 2008). The primary reason reported is often failed intimate relationships or failed marriages. Certainly both spouses missed each other but the returning service member may need some well-deserved rest and the nondeployed spouse may be eager to soon turn over some of the household responsibilities to the home-again spouse. Each may feel like they have done their part and deserve the other's attention upon return, but there are times when the military member returns as a different person—affected by posttraumatic stress disorder, possibly physically injured, or perhaps addicted to something. Some parents become frustrated seeing how quickly the family gets back into old bad habits upon the spouse's return; for example, sitting glued in front of the television instead of reading together or spending some quality time with the family. Some service members have reported one of the biggest adjustments in returning to home is dealing with the "noise" in the house—television, kids, etc.

How school psychologists can help. Families dealing with their first deployment will benefit greatly from the school psychologist explaining the dynamics of the homecoming. In preparation for the return and reunion of the service member, school psychologists should advise families that spouses and children need to talk about realistic plans and expectations. Involve the children in planning for the homecoming and encourage them to express their feelings about it. Parents should accept the child's feelings and have the returning parent talk with the child about things the child is interested in (storybooks, etc.). Be sure to encourage parents to talk with their children about what is going on in their lives as well as what they have been through. Remind parents to reassure their children that they are needed and that we are all happy to have the family safely together again.

Possibly the most important thing is for both spouses to be ready to be understanding and patient with each other. Reestablishing relationships will take time and communication. It is common to find service members wanting to spend every moment with the family. On the other hand, keep in mind that it is also normal for the service member to need their personal space upon return. Many are

simply looking forward to sleeping in a soft comfortable bed for the first time since they left! Expect things to be different and prepare to be flexible.

Reintegration and the Adaptations to Change

The reintegration of the service member into his or her family and society often can take up to 6 months. Upon returning from combat, military members are required to attend debriefing classes and are followed medically for potential mental health issues for approximately a month. Many also work only half days during that time so as to ease them back into their regular work schedule. During this time, families work to stabilize relationships in the home. Recent research suggests that 1 in 8 returning soldiers suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder ("1 in 8," 2004) but less than half of those with problems seek help, mostly out of fear of being stigmatized or hurting their careers ("Soldiers to Learn," 2007).

How school psychologists can help. Communities should not wait for military members and their families to seek help: it should be brought to them. Small group sessions for children with a deployed parent as well as sessions for spouses with a deployed spouse would be an ideal way of serving these special families. Having a primary caregiver deployed to a war zone for an indeterminate period is among the more stressful events a child and family can experience. It is also an event that can bring a family closer together through increased recognition and support for individual contributions. Please take advantage of our unique opportunity to work with children and their families before, during, and after deployment.

Resources

Military OneSource (www.militaryonesource.com)

Military Homefront (www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil)

Pavlicin, K. M. (2003). *Surviving deployment: A guide for military families*. St. Paul, MN: Elva Resa Publishing.

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