



Stress of war takes mental toll on military kids

Children of deployed service members at risk of psychological problems

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The years-long U.S. commitment in Iraq and Afghanistan is taking a significant toll on the children of service members, who are 2½ times more likely to develop psychological problems than American children in general, new research indicates.

The study, published this week in the *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, found that deployment of a parent was correlated to high stress levels in the parent who remains at home, which it said was linked to greater psychological impact on children.

The findings open a new window on the collateral damage wartime deployment can exact back at home.

There is abundant research on the effects of deployment and combat on service members themselves, said the researchers, led by Maj. Eric M. Flake, a physician at Madigan Army Medical Center in Tacoma, Wash. However, "few studies have looked at how having a parent deployed during wartime affects children," they wrote.

Davita Hoffman, a specialist at Pikes Peak Behavioral Health Group in Colorado Springs, Colo., said the stress was compounded by military staffing shortages that lead to multiple deployments for many service members.

"Don't forget, these families generally move once every three years," Hoffman said.

When Thane Houchell's father was assigned to Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, La., in January, Thane, 17, had to abandon his friends and classes at his high school in Prattville, Ala.

"Military children give up a lot, and the fathers and moms are gone a lot," said Jana Houchell, Thane's mother.

Thane acknowledged that the impact on children like him was very real.

"You're kind of in the military, too," Thane said. "You've got to make sacrifices for your country."

Children's stress levels could be 'toxic'

Military children bear "a complex psychosocial burden," according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, which agreed that data on the effects of deployment on children were only just beginning to emerge.

Recent data make it clear that children of parents who are deployed during wartime "experience ambiguous loss and stress, often beyond normative levels, that may become toxic if not detected and addressed in a timely manner," the academy said.

Hoffman said many service members were diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder when they came back home, and "the child will mimic those symptoms the parent has."

"It's a classic case of a child acting out what they see from Mom and Dad," she said.

Master Sgt. Minnie E. Hiller-Cousins, administrator of the Family Assistance Center at the National Guard Armory in Teaneck, N.J., said that in her experience, the stress starts much earlier than that, with the simple loss of daily contact.

Hiller-Cousins, a 30-year veteran of the National Guard, recalled the emotional impact on her 2-year-old

grandson when she was deployed to Iraq, where she served for eight months.

"If I close my eyes, I can hear him screaming as the bus was pulling off," she said.

In the study published this week, Flake and his colleagues noted a report last month that found that children of service members [sought outpatient mental health care 2 million times last year](#), double the number when the war in Iraq began more than six years ago.

When that finding was combined with their research, they concluded that "the stresses of deployment seem to be associated with a heightened risk for psychosocial morbidity in military children."

Parents' stress translates to children's stress

The study questioned the spouses of 101 recently deployed Army personnel, each of whom had at least one child aged 5 to 12. They were asked to provide information about both themselves and their children.

Based on the parents' responses, Flake and his colleagues concluded that 32 percent of the children were at "high risk" for psychosocial problems, which can include learning disorders; developmental disabilities; and emotional, behavioral and psychosomatic problems. That percentage was about 2½ times higher than the norm for American children of the same age in general.

The immediate factor appeared to be high stress in the parent who remained at home, the study found.

More services lower stress levels

In the study, 42 percent of such parents were found to be under "high-risk levels of parental stress." Overall, either the child, the parent or both were found to be at risk in 55 percent of the families in the study.

The report noted a correlation between the level of support a family receives and a lowering of risk levels, which led them to recommend that all families of deployed service members should be offered support resources. Currently, they said, such services are more commonly available to families living on military bases.

"Assessing the parents' levels of stress and support could help in recognizing children at high risk of problems with psychosocial adjustment, allowing them to be targeted for appropriate and timely services and support," they said.

That is a message that has long been promoted by the National Military Families Association, a nonprofit organization that provides programs and lobbies lawmakers for better "quality of life" policies for the families of service members.

The association noted what it called "the cumulative effects of eight years of war on children, their families and their communities." It said it the children of service members deployed in wartime were commonly racked with worry over the safety of both parents and were under intense strain from the upheaval of changing schools and their relationships with service providers.

The group called on the Pentagon and Congress to "adapt to the changing needs of service members and families as they cope with multiple deployments and react to separations, reintegration and the situation of those returning with both visible and invisible wounds."

"Standardization in delivery, accessibility and funding are essential. Programs should provide for families in all stages of deployment and reach out to them in all geographic locations," it said. "Families should be given the tools to take greater responsibility for their own readiness."

By Alex Johnson of msnbc.com. Ann Curry of NBC News and the following NBC stations contributed to this report: KOAA of Colorado Springs, Colo.; KTAL of Shreveport, La.; and KVOA of Tucson, Ariz., contributed to this report.

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