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# Views from the Home Front

## The Experience of Children from Military Families

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**R**esearch has begun to document the challenges faced by members of the U.S. military in deploying for war and reintegrating into life at home. But little is known about how wartime experience and parental deployments are affecting the children from military families. A RAND study commissioned by the National Military Family Association addressed this issue. The research is among the first to explore how these children are faring academically, socially, and emotionally during an extended period of wartime. Results show that children from military families studied may be experiencing above-average levels of emotional and behavioral difficulties, relative to national norms. Further, longer periods of deployment were associated with greater levels of challenges both during deployment and afterward.

RAND researchers surveyed 1,500 military children (applicants to Operation Purple® summer camps, a program of the National Military Family Association for children of military service members) as well as each child's non-deployed parent (or other primary caregiver) by phone. The children's average age was 13 (range 11–17 years); 47 percent were girls. Approximately 57 percent of children had a parent in the Army, 20 percent in the Air Force, approximately 17 percent in the Navy, and the remainder were in the Marine Corps or Coast Guard. The majority of the military parents were in the Active Component, with approximately 37 percent in the National Guard or Reserve. Ninety-five percent of children had experienced at least one parental deployment in the last three years, and nearly 40 percent were experiencing a parental deployment at the time of the interview.

Analysis of the data showed the following:

- Children in military families experienced emotional and behavioral difficulties at rates above national averages.
- About one-third of the children reported symptoms of anxiety, which is somewhat higher than the percentage reported in other studies of children.
- Self-reported problems varied by age and gender: Older youths and boys reported more difficulties with school and more problem behaviors, such as fighting; greater numbers of younger children (compared with older children) and girls reported anxiety symptoms.

The results also revealed challenges posed specifically by deployment:

- Longer periods of parental deployment (within the past three years) were linked to greater difficulties in children's social and emotional functioning, at least based on caregiver reports.
- Deployment-related challenges varied by age and gender: Older youths experienced greater school- and peer-related difficulties during deployment; girls experienced greater difficulties during the period of reintegration than did boys.

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- Children whose caregivers had better self-reported mental health were better able to cope with the deployment experience both during and after.
- Living on-base was linked with reduced difficulties both during and after deployment.

The results represent an important first step in understanding the link between parental deployment and military child and family well-being. The findings suggest the need for more research to improve understanding in several areas, including the link between caregiver mental health and child well-being and the reasons why girls and older youth may be reporting more challenges with deployment. The results also highlight several avenues for possible intervention. For example, families may benefit from targeted support to deal with stressors from multiple months of deployment, rather than only during initial months. Further, families in which caregivers face mental health issues may need more support for both caregiver and child.

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This study was commissioned by the National Military Family Association. The association fights for benefits and programs that strengthen and protect uniformed services families and reflect the nation's respect for their service.

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