



## Experiences of Military Youth Across the Deployment Cycle

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### Background

The deployment of a family member can be distressing for military youth, but it also can supply opportunities for growth. When a family member is deployed, youth are at risk for academic, emotional, and behavioral problems, yet despite these stressors, many youth are remarkably resilient. The goal of this study was to understand the changes, challenges, and opportunities facing youth during a family member's deployment and reintegration.

### Research Design

We conducted in-depth interviews with 33 military youth who had experienced a family member's deployment. The interviews took place during a 5-day residential camp for military youth during the summer of 2011.

Three trained interviewers conducted one-on-one, semi-structured, audiotaped interviews during a recreational period in the camp. The interviews were divided into three parts: (a) an opening segment solicited demographic information, (b) a middle segment contained questions about deployment, and (c) a final segment asked about reunion. Participants received a \$20 gift card to a national retailer to thank them for their time.

### Sample

Participants were 21 boys and 12 girls who ranged from 10 to 13 years of age ( $M = 11.39$  years,  $SD = 1.11$  years). For most youth, the deployed family member was their father ( $n = 30$ ), but for other participants it was both of their parents ( $n = 1$ ), their stepfather ( $n = 1$ ), or their brother ( $n =$

1). The deployed family member was part of the U.S. Army ( $n = 14$ ), the Army National Guard ( $n = 15$ ), the Navy ( $n = 2$ ), the Air Force ( $n = 1$ ), or the Air National Guard ( $n = 1$ ).

Approximately half of the youth participated in the study while their family member was overseas ( $n = 17$ ). The majority had experienced at least one cycle of deployment and reunion ( $n = 31$ ), but two participants were awaiting their family member's return from a first tour of duty.

### **Findings: Experiences of Deployment**

Children identified a variety of negative and positive outcomes of a parent's deployment. Challenges included (a) missing the deployed family member, (b) being responsible for more household tasks, (c) having trouble maintaining positive relationships with siblings and the at-home parent, (d) dealing with emotional issues, and (e) problems managing daily routines. Positive outcomes from deployment included (a) being well-prepared for future deployments, (b) becoming more self-sufficient, (c) having new or unique experiences as part of a military family, and (d) building family cohesion.

### **Findings: Experiences During Reintegration**

Participants identified four changes to family life when the service member returned home, including (a) spending time together, (b) experiencing emotional tranquility, (c) returning to patterns in place before deployment, and (d) having difficulty reintegrating the service member into everyday routines. Some military youth reported that the reunion matched their expectations, but others noted that the reunion fell short of their expectations or that they did not expect the returning service member to be so tired or so irritable. Participants also described four issues of uncertainty, including (a) questions about the service member's activities during deployment, (b) reasons for joining and deploying, (c) family life, and (d) the possibility of future deployments.

### **Recommendations for Families**

Our results imply several recommendations for military families negotiating the cycle of deployment and reunion. Most obviously, youth may fare better during deployment if they are knowledgeable about the changes to family life that may arise. Youth who are prepared to shoulder new responsibilities, accommodate shifts in everyday routines, and be flexible about family traditions may handle deployment more effectively than those who are caught off-guard by the changes.

In terms of homecoming, our findings suggest that reintegration may be particularly stressful for military youth who construct unrealistic expectations for reunion and ultimately are disappointed. (As one participant remarked, "I thought it was gonna be like the movies, you know, in the movies, how, like, they go swimming and have so much fun. Well, my dad, he did a bunch of paperwork and stuff, so that was it."). Implications for practice are that caregivers should (a) help military youth conceptualize reunion in a sensible way, and (b) prepare them for the possibility that the service member will need time to rest and recover.

### **Future Research**

The next step is to track military families over time across the full cycle of deployment. Accordingly, we will seek grant funding to launch a study that follows families before, during, and after deployment.

We welcome any feedback you have about our study or our next steps in this line of research. Please contact Dr. Leanne Knobloch at [knobl@illinois.edu](mailto:knobl@illinois.edu).