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By

Jennifer Witcher Deppa

2011

The Report committee for Jennifer Witcher Deppa

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How parental absence and frequent family moves affect the academic adjustment and emotional well-being of children from US military families.

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: ______________________________

Toni Falbo

____

Keisha Bentley

How parental absence and frequent family moves affect the academic adjustment and emotional well-being of children from US military families.

By

Jennifer Witcher Deppa, BSFCS

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Education

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2011

I would like to dedicate this report to my family.

My parents for supporting me and believing in me for so many years

My siblings for encouraging me.

My husband for inspiring me.

How parental absence and frequent family moves affect the academic adjustment and emotional well-being of children from US military families.

By

Jennifer Witcher Deppa. M.Ed.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

SUPERVISOR: Toni Falbo

Many studies have been conducted on military families in order to determine the effect of parent absence and frequent family moves on the academic adjustment and emotional well-being of children. Research has shown that environmental factors, such as parents coping abilities, social support, length of deployment, frequency of moves, and preparation for deployments or moves can influence the effects children experience due to deployments and relocations. Children of military families can be resilient and successful in school during deployment and moves.

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The goal of this report is to examine the research, with an emphasis on articles focused on post September 11 research, on how parental absence due to deployment or death and relocations affects the academic adjustment and well-being of children of military parents in the United States. Academic adjustment is generally defined as a child or adolescent making good grades, no serious behavioral problems, getting along with peers, teachers, and parents, and participating in extracurricular activities (Strobino and Salvaterra, 2000). I am defining emotional well-being for children or adolescent as one who copes well with stress, maintains good relationships with parents, siblings, and peers, and exhibits few signs of depression.

Recently, Park (2011) described the children of soldiers as having to adapt to changes, such as deployments and relocations, readily and often. The average military family moves every two to three years within America or overseas. This constant moving can create in children a “rootless” feeling and cause them to have “difficulties building deeper relationships or maintaining long-term commitments” (Park 2011, p. 66).

In another article about military families, periods of predeployment, the weeks or months leading up to a deployment, and deployments are particularly high stress times for military families. While the military parent leaves and deals with the stresses of living in a combat zone, “the families they leave behind face their own difficulties” (Palmer 2008, p. 209). Children of military parents who are left here are less likely to have contact with the deployed parent while the parent at home is most likely “relatively impaired during this period of heightened stress” (Palmer 2008, p. 209). Children respond to parental stress, which can impact their everyday life. This added stress and worry can lead to an increase in academic and disciplinary problems. All of these factors lead to extra strain on developing adolescents. According to Palmer, both parental absence and the frequent moves associated with the military affect academic adjustment and the well-being of military children.

Effects of Parental Absence on Well-Being and Academic Adjustment

Temporary Separation Due to Deployment

Numerous military families undergo deployments every year, even more since September 11, 2001 with the Armed Forces being involved in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq. Children who have a parent deploy for any amount of time, from one month to one and a half years, typically exhibit some problems adjusting academically. Furthermore, there are potential hindrances to their well-being. There are hundreds of thousands of children who have had a parent deploy in the last ten years and they face social, emotional, and intellectual tests to their development (Levin, Daynard, & Dexter, 2008). MacFarlane (2009) notes that a child with a parent deployed, particularly to a combat zone, is one of the most stressful things the child will encounter. One of the biggest factors in determining how a child adjusts to the deployment is how the remaining parent copes. When the nonservice member parent is unable to cope with the deployment his/herself, the child can experience negative outcomes, including diminished school performance.

Chandra et. al. (2010) found that the more frequent the deployments, the more stress the child and family faces. People have often thought that each deployment gets easier, when in fact the opposite is true. There is a positive correlation between the number of deployments and the amount of stress reported by the child, suggesting that the more months a parent is absent due to deployment, the stressors of sustaining a balanced home life increases. This greater amount of stress affects many parts of their daily lives, including school performance. With more frequent deployments, the remaining parent is also more likely to be more stressed and have a harder time dealing with that stress, which creates more problems for the child. The authors also found gender and age differences. They found that girls had more problems than boys when the deployed parent returned, most likely because of the additional roles she took on in the household during the parent's absence. Also, the authors found that, contrary to some previous research, middle to late adolescents experienced more problems during deployment and reintegration than younger children. Because older children take on more responsibilities, they will take on more role alterations during deployment and reintegration, so it is reasonable that they would experience more stress than younger children. This article also found that children living in on-base housing experienced fewer problems related to deployment. Families where the remaining parent worked reported more problems and stress. Also, consistent with many other articles, in situations where the remaining parent had diminished mental health, more challenges were described and this intensified the stress the child felt.

However, there are studies which find negative effects for younger children, as well. A study in *Clinician Reviews* (2008) found that younger children, ages three to five, with a parent deployed are considerably more likely to have behavioral issues than a child without a deployed parent. Paris et. al. (2010) notes, because of the general age of soldiers, younger children are overly represented in military families. Frequent or long deployments can cause excess problems in children ranging from attachment disorders, depression, and anxiety problems. For young children, an absence of a primary caregiver can cause developmental problems. It seems clear that no matter the age of the child, he or she will be affected by a deploying parent.

Seplin (1952) revealed that children whose father had been absent showed closer relationships with their mother and had more behavioral issues than children whose father was present. Crumley and Blumenthal (1973) conducted a study on children who were examined at an Army child psychiatry clinic found that repeated father absence resulted in increased feelings of anger, they depicted an imagined relationship with the missing parent, and experienced more anxiety.

Beaty (1995) showed that boys whose father was absent during middle school demonstrated a lesser sense of masculinity and lesser interpersonal relationships than their counterparts who had their father present. This article examines absence due to career, particularly military commitments. The sample had 40 middle school boys from a Midwestern suburb. Half of these individuals had fathers present while the other half did not. A sociometric instrument which used rating scales to measure perceived masculinity and perceived peer adjustment. The results showed that there were in fact negative effects “on masculine self-concept and peer relationship adjustment of male children and adolescents" (Beaty 1995, p. 879). It seems clear that an absent father negatively affects the development of boys on many levels, whether it be self-image, psychosocial, or long-term relationships.

Previous studies have looked at (e.g. Hillenbrand, 1976) how father absence affected children in military families. In particular, Hillenbrand looked at intelligence, classroom behavior, parental dominance, parental identification and family structure. Hillenbrand states that father absence has become increasingly common in America, but notes that even in military families, where it can be expected, it is a "crisis situation" (Hillenbrand 1976, p. 481). Hillenbrand relates that historically, father absence has been linked to a multitude of things, such as increased dependency and worse results on intelligence and achievement measures. This could be due to lack of a male role model during formative years and more interaction with the mother. Hillenbrand's method was 73 boys and 53 girls in the sixth grade in the United States Marine Corp School System in Virginia. Parents were given a questionnaire to determine the history of military caused absence in the family, age, health, and emotional history of the child, as well as number and sex of siblings, and a description of the parent's observation of the child's reaction to the father's absence. The results were interesting. She noted most families "accepted the father's frequent absence with stoicism" (Hillenbrand 1976, p. 453). Most families reported missing the father, but said that it was expected and something that is standard for their lifestyle. Most parents agreed the absence was stressful on the children, particularly if it was a combat deployment. After analyzing the results, Hillenbrand found that earlier absences created more aggression in boys, with depression, irritability, and impulsiveness. With girls, earlier absence was related to poorer quantitative capacity. Interestingly, boys with older sisters were noted to be more aggressive and dependent, less socially and emotionally mature, had worse motor control, and achieved less in school as reported by their teachers. Girls who had older sisters were seen as more aggressive, but actually higher achievers. Teachers also reported that girls with older brothers had greater quantitative ability, higher I.Q., and were more favored by teachers. For first-born males, father absence early in life was related to lessened I.Q. scores. However, there were cases where this absence, generally occurring later in adolescence, caused increased maturity (Hillenbrand, 1976). It seems evident that father absence due to deployments affects different individuals in diverse ways. One's position in the family, number of siblings, and age when their father deployed all influence how the deployment affects the adolescent. These effects directly impact how the adolescent deals with stress, performs in school, reacts with friends and family, among a myriad of other things.

Permanent Separation Due to Death

In circumstances where a parent dies while on active duty, the surviving parent's response can affect the child's emotional response (Chandra et. al, 2010). If the surviving parent is emotionally troubled and unable to care for the children, the child's well-being is negatively affected and he/she generally shows more academic problems.

Cozza, Chun, and Polo (2005) looked at children who had a parent serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom. They noted that in most situations, the media, which depicts many graphic incidences of war and combat, causes a great deal of stress. As military families watch the television or surf the web, they are often bombarded by images of war. Particularly for children who live on military bases where there are meetings, memorial services, classes, and many other things relating to the death of a soldier, there are constant reminders of the war and possible death of a parent.

Lang and Zagorsky (1997) reported that the death of a parent has adverse effects on their children, regardless of whether the parent died while in military service. The subjects in their study came from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). It began in 1979 and had 12,686 individuals between the ages of 14 and 22. The authors used information from interviews between 1979 and 1993, and eliminated individuals who did not answer the 1988 childhood retrospective supplement (in order to establish a year by year history of family structure), did not take the Armed Forces Qualification Test (which measures cognitive aptitude), or did not complete the 1993 interview (which gives a complete academic history). They found that fathers' presence is important for "cognitive performance and education of both sons and daughters" but these outcomes are only affected in daughters with a mother absent (Lang & Zagorsky, 1997 p. 271). However, the most significant result was the death of a father reducing the chance his son will get married (Lang & Zagorsky, 1997). While this study is not aimed directly at absence caused by a military deployment or death during deployment, but the results still apply. This article suggests that children raised in homes where both parents are present have more favorable outcomes.

Maternal vs. Paternal Separation

Applewhite and Mays, Jr. (1996) compared children who have been affected by maternal separation due to military absence to those who have had a father absent. The study compared the psychosocial functioning of children during prolonged periods of separation from their mother or father. Applewhite and Mays, Jr. found further evidence that suggests children are more likely to demonstrate behavioral and medical symptoms during the separation. Also, many children who have a parent deployed experience trouble sleeping and insecurity, as well as sadness and nightmares. The authors use Bowlby's attachment theory (1960) to lay the foundation for their study on how mother absence affects children's well-being. Bowlby suggested that separation during childhood from the preferred attachment figure result in anxiety, depression, aggressive behavior, and phobias later in life. According to the article, "maternal separation may create more distress for children than father absence and lengthy separations may compound the negative influence of family separation" (27). To test whether this is true, the authors studied children between the ages of four and eighteen living on Fort Meade, MD. They used 100 female and 100 male service members. A child questionnaire was given to measure the child's experience with the separation, their psychosocial functioning, as well as family stressors and demographics. They ultimately collected 110 questionnaires, 55 from maternal based households and 55 from paternal based households. The average age was 9.4 for those from a household with an absent father and 10.4 from the families with an absent mother. Overall, there were no significant differences in the groups based on age, number of separations, time at current location, or number of moves. However, children of active duty mothers were more likely to be from a single parent household and were slightly older. However, the authors found no statistical difference in the psychosocial development of children from families with an absent mother verses those with an absent father. This finding "starkly contrasts with accepted conventional wisdom and cherished theoretical suppositions" (Applewhite & Mays, Jr. 1996, p. 35). However, Stolz (1951) conducted a study on how wartime maternal separation during infancy caused the child to be fearful, nervous, shy and worried. The author noted that absence during early childhood created a fear that the mother may not return, while father absence was less disturbing. While this finding is not in agreement with the previous study, it may be that maternal separation during infancy has more of an effect on development than a maternal separation during late childhood or adolescence.

Frequent Family Moves

Effects on Academic Adjustment

While there is research aimed at how separation from parents affects the education and resilience of children of military parents, there is also research targeted at how another aspect of military life affects children: frequent family moves. The typical military family moves every two to three years (Palmer 2008). This frequent moving and its effects on the academic adjustment and emotional well-being of military children has been the topic of different studies.

Strobino and Salvaterra (2000) studied how military relocations effect the academic adjustment of adolescents. While noting that outcomes are not always predictable, the authors founds that the frequent moving alone may not be the sole cause of poor adjustment for military children. Using a large sample 6,382 military children, between the ages of 10 and 18, from all four branches of the military, from a research project by the Air Force Office of Scientific Research, the authors found that, in general, the military students in this sample adjusted well to moves, were average or above average in classes, were involved in extracurricular activities and felt support from parents and teachers. This is contrary to what people generally assume; that frequent moving has a negative outcome on military children’s adjustment, hence terms like *Army Brat.* It is assumed that children faced with regular relocations and school transitions may be susceptible to a regression in school performance and less participation in school activities. The authors use the strengths perspective, which conveys that an individual's aptitudes or capabilities, as well as the resources in the environment contribute to the success of that individual, to explain why this might not be true in all cases. The strengths perspective encourages the consideration of the contribution of both the adolescent and the environmental factors, such as family, school, friends, etc, when looking at the academic success or failure of an adolescent. The authors conclude that the move itself might not be a disadvantage to the adolescent, rather it depends on the support systems in place.

Temple and Reynolds (1999) conducted a study of low income children in Chicago. While not directly aimed at military children, this study compares children who have moved multiple times with those who have not. The study looked at 1,087 Black children from low income families in the Chicago Longitudinal Study. Of this population, 21% changed schools at least three times between kindergarten and seventh grade while 73% changed schools at least once. On average, students who changed schools frequently performed one year behind on achievement tests at the end of seventh grade. However, the authors only attributed the frequent moving to being behind for 50% of the students when considering other attributes, such as prior achievement, number of years of preschool participation in an education intervention program, and level of parental education. The results showed that frequent, rather than occasional, moving increases the risk of middle adolescent students underachieving (Temple & Reynolds 1999).

Dusenberry (2008) described an interstate compact which would allow easier transitions for military children as they relocate and change schools. There are numerous cases of military children who were unable to take certain classes because they did not have the correct prerequisite, who were held back a year due to age or curriculum, who could not even start school because of immunization policies. All of these factors directly affect how military children are able to adjust to a new school after a move. A compact is a solution in which many advocates fought for. Compacts have been around since colonial times and are often used to settle inter-state disputes. Historically, compacts were used to solve boundary disputes, but it is essentially a contract between two or more states in which the U.S. Constitution authorizes the states to enact policies in areas that states traditionally have control, such as education. An education compact between states would allow for military children to transfer between schools with more ease, whether it is within state or between states. The compact sets up rules for schools to follow that allow military children to take AP, honors, vocational, or technical classes and waives prerequisites for many of these classes. The compact also allows schools to waive state required courses, such as a state history class, if a similar course was previously taken. Parents are also allowed to hand deliver records, and if they do not, schools have 30 days to get the records from the sending school. Among these are other rules that ease the transfer for military children. According to the National School Board Association (2011), in August 2008, the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children came into effect when the first 10 states formally adopted the agreements. Now, 35 states have joined the compact.

Effects on Emotional Well-being

Palmer (2008) looked at how frequent relocations affected family interaction and well-being in children. Children, because every time the family moves they have to change schools, have a hard time making and keeping friends. Furthermore, frequent moves affect family dynamics. The stress of moving can influence many aspects of life, including the extent to which the parents are satisfied in their marriage, whether or not the non-service spouse can maintain consistent employment, as well as the family's financial status. All of these factors affect the home life of children and adolescents. However, Graham-Weber (2001) found that frequent relocations that are routine, as they generally become in the military, as well as multiple deployments may actually increase family coping skills. Because the family learns to rely on each other and these circumstances and stress are expected, the family unit is better able to deal with them. Weber and Weber (2005) found that families with more routine and frequent relocations actually have adolescents that exhibit fewer behavioral problems.

Furthermore, the parents have an enhanced view of relocating. As already mentioned, children are effected by the level of stress the parents display. The authors went on to say that that measuring how parents react and adjust to relocations as well as parent-child interactions are significant when attempting to understand how this mobile lifestyle is a risk factor for some military families and not others.

Kelley (2003) examined 86 mother-child dyads in traditional military families in the United States. Kelley found that affirmative and encouraging relationship with mothers was associated to less loneliness in adolescents. This is parallel to previous research. The longer a family lives at one residence, the better able adolescents can make friends. Interesting, though, was the finding that moving was not as important to adolescent adjustment as other family factors, including the functioning of the mother as well as family relationships. The family environment is very important for the child's psychosocial adjustment.

Applications

When it comes to the best options for taking care of military children, several studies have notable suggestions. Palmer (2008) suggested several factors which influence how children in the military adjust to deployments and relocations including maternal psychopathology, the number of additional family stressors, how the present and deployed parent copes, how stable the marriage is, what social and community support groups are available and utilized, the level of satisfaction the non-service member spouse is with the military, how regular the family and present spouse is able to communicate during a deployment, and the length of the deployment. Webb (2004) notes that higher parental functioning may lead to a more positive outcome for the military child during deployment and war time. If the parents are dealing with the deployment and relocation in a constructive and consistent manner, this bodes well for the children.

Kelley (2003) had many suggestions on the best way to ease the transition for mobile families. As mentioned earlier, a positive relationship between mother and child generally reduces the child's feelings of loneliness and can act as a cushion against the negative effects of social seclusion. As a recommendation, "parents, teachers, and others who work with military children should recognize that moving to a new neighborhood and a new school disrupts children's peer relationships, and children may be especially emotionally vulnerable and need greater parental time and attention during the months immediately after a move" (Kelley 2003, p. 1021). Children and adolescents need time to adjust to new living conditions and environments. Parents who know that a relocation is coming should take time to research the area they are moving to in an attempt to avoid another move due to neighborhood problems, school situation, or finances. Family relationships impact many aspects of child and adolescent adjustment, including temporary (such as loneliness) and stable (such as self-esteem) features.

Strobino and Salvaterra (2000) encourage social workers and teachers to employ programs and strategies to increase the optimistic experiences for military adolescents. In order to do this, adolescents need to feel support from parents and teachers, and feel encouragement to participate in social activities.

In a 2002 issue of Army Reserve Magazine, several tips were laid out to smooth the educational transition of military children. Parents are encouraged to start making preparations for the move as soon as they are given relocation orders. This includes notifying the child's current school and asking them to prepare the child's files to be transferred. Be proactive by getting copies of the child's transcripts and a copy of the course descriptions the child has taken to help the new school appropriately place the child in classes. Parents who keep a file up to date with "old report cards, contact information, and course descriptions have a much easier time when registering at new schools" ("Tips to smooth educational transition" 2002, p. 27). Some other important information to always have would be the child's shot records, social security card, and birth certificate. All of these documents will make for easier enrollment at a new school. Another thing parents can easily do to ease the transition is do some research on the new school. Either call ahead or look up the school online. Find out about how the scheduling at that school works and inquire about placement in special classes. Also, when leaving the current school, make sure the parents have all the pertinent information, such as email address, fax number, and all important phone numbers. While none of these tips are difficult to do, they will ease the transition to a new school, making the relocation easier on the child.

Harrison and Vannest (2008) studied children of reserve and guard servicemen. The children of these soldiers generally attend regular schools and teachers, counselors, and administrators are not trained to deal with the effects of the military lifestyle. The Department of Defense specifically trains teachers in their schools to address academic and behavioral impact the military can have on adolescents. Though research has found children exhibit no long term affects from a deployed parent, educators should be aware of the impact a deployment has immediately on a child, such as suspension, expulsions, delinquency, etc. The authors note three main issues that affect the adjustment and well-being during a deployment: the non-military parent's ability to cope, how long the deployment lasts, and whether it is a combat or peacetime deployment. Most often, as stated in earlier research, a large amount of the stress during a deployment is related to the remaining parent's inability to deal with an absent spouse. A direct link has also been found between the length of the deployment and the level of depression, behavioral problems, and anxiety. The authors recommend, because academic and behavioral issues are affected by home environment, relieving home stressors through services because schools are responsible for the academic performance of students. The authors recommend a variety of services, such as participation in FRG, or family readiness groups, and assisting in communication with the deployed parent. There are two categories of support, class-wide and school-wide. School-wide support includes creating a sympathetic and encouraging environment that urges routine. Schools can also facilitate teacher-focused, parent-focused, and student-focused support groups. Class-wide support can be built into subject matter lessons. For example, a math lesson could include a deployment calendar while a social studies class could study the area where soldiers are deployed. There are a wide variety activities teachers could include in daily lessons to support children of deployed soldiers. Teachers and administrators being aware of the issues military children go through can greatly help the child adjust during a deployment.

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VITA

Jennifer WItcher Deppa was born in Austin, Texas. After graduating from high school in Liberty Hill, Texas in 2005, she enrolled at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. She graduated in December 2008 with a Bachelors of Science in Family and Consumer Sciences. In August 2009, she entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin.

Permanent Address: 4820 W Hwy 29
Georgetown, Texas 78628

This report was typed by the author.