Resilience and Vulnerability: 
The Deployment Experiences of Youth in Military Families

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With

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STUDY OVERVIEW

This report summarizes the findings of a study supported by the U.S. Army’s Operation Military Kids (U.S. Army Child, Youth, and School Services) that focused on the adaptations of adolescents in military families when a parent is deployed, as well as when the family experiences multiple deployments. Qualitative methods were used through focus groups conducted with youth attending camps in the summer of 2008. The research effort was led by Drs. Angela J. Huebner (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Department of Human Development) and Jay A. Mancini (formerly at Virginia Tech, now at The University of Georgia, Department of Child and Family Development).

Systematic study of adolescents in military families is a recent occurrence. The findings presented in this report expand our previous work of exploring adaptation during military deployments (Huebner & Mancini, 2005). The findings presented in this report confirm observations made by professionals who work with military adolescents and provide a context for exploring new ways to support adolescents who have a deployed or redeploying parent.

The findings have general applicability to program development, whether the focus is on the provision of services or on curriculum development. Findings can serve as catalysts for discussions among youth development professionals, both inside and outside the military family support system.

This report is divided into these sections: (1) Study context and conceptual framework; (2) the pre-deployment experience; (3) experiences during deployment; 4) post-deployment and reintegration; 5) the experience of multiple deployments; and 6) advice study participants have for other youth in military families. Within these interrelated and overlapping sections of our study findings are multiple sub-sections on major themes in the research; each of these includes a summary of results, and direct quotes from focus group participants. A final report section contains implications of this research for professionals who work with military families.

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STUDY CONTEXT AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Changing Nature of Military Service and Family Life

The number of military service members and families impacted by the Gulf War is significant. According to a 2007 report issued by the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy), more than half (55%) of active military members are married, and about 43% have children (40% of whom are under the age of 5 years). About 1.5 million service members have spent service time in Iraq with many serving multiple tours of duty (Olson, 2007). This translates into more time away than at home for many military personnel, especially given that each deployment can last up to 15 months at a time. This marks the first time in our nation's history that we have maintained forward deployment of service members for such an extended period of time using an all voluntary force. Of note is that up to 45% of our deployed force has been comprised of service members from the National Guard and Reserve--forces that have historically not been used in this capacity (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, 2007).

The Deployment Cycle and Strains on Families and Adolescents

Historically, reports of deployment experience have been organized around the various phases of the deployment cycle. Given the recent increased frequency and duration of deployments we speculate that the differentiation between phases is becoming blurred. Nevertheless, there are important distinctions between phases as well as unique stressors. The traditional deployment cycle very generally includes pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment (reunion).

Pre-deployment includes “mobilization” or that period when Service members prepare for war or other national emergencies by organizing their resources. Mobilization begins the process of family separation and the associated stressors. Families may have concerns about financial issues, employment, childcare, or social support. Depending on the family structure, plans may be made for the military connected adolescent to go live with relatives or other guardians. If the relatives are not nearby, this may mean changing schools and leaving friends. These are important issues families consider before the military member leaves.

During deployment itself the Service member usually becomes geographically separated from his or her family. Regardless of whether or not the family has to relocate, the absence of the Service member in the family can be stressful. The Service member’s spouse is now acting as a single parent. He or she may have sole responsibility for maintaining the household and raising the children. The family financial situation may necessitate taking on a new job or changing jobs. If the deployed parent was a single parent to begin with, these problems are intensified. Adolescents may feel isolated if they are unable to communicate with their deployed parent. They may worry about the parent’s safety. Because of the changed family structure, they may be experiencing inconsistent parenting, or changes in the family schedule, responsibilities and rules. These changes may be particularly acute for National Guard and Reserve members who have traditionally had part-time commitments. They and their families may not have ever defined themselves as “military families” and thus never accessed military support systems. Moreover,
because Guard and Reserve members are geographically dispersed they are not likely to be near installations where many important family support programs are traditionally located.

Post-Deployment (reunion) is a hopeful and highly anticipated time, but can also be a stressful. Depending on the length of the deployment, the family may have functioned without the military member for several months or even years. Usually the family has adapted to the new structure and roles. When the military member returns, it may upset the balance that had been achieved. Roles may need to be renegotiated and returning military members may feel like they are no longer needed by their families. They may be concerned about their civilian employment status. Adolescents may be hesitant to give up newly acquired responsibilities. Developmentally, adolescents change dramatically over the course of a year or more.

Within each phase of deployment there are new strains on families, and on adolescents. In this study all the adolescents had experienced or were currently experiencing having a parent deployed. For some this was a first-time experience, while for others it was a second or third-time experience.

Adolescent Stress and Coping

Research on adolescent stress and coping suggests several consistent findings (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). First, adolescents’ family environment influences their level of stress and coping abilities. Parents can model healthy or unhealthy ways of dealing with stress and their behaviors are often modeled by their adolescent. Second, the pile up of both major and minor stressors is related to poor adolescent adjustment, especially in the area of depression. Emotional stressors and role strain have both been identified as stressors for non-military affiliated adolescents (Bird & Harris, 1990; Rosen et al. 1993). Third, adolescents who rely on withdrawal as a major form of coping tend to display more depressive symptoms.

Recent research conducted with families of this conflict has documented a host of outcomes related to military deployments. For military children and youth these include increased rates of child maltreatment, mostly in the form of neglect (Gibbs, Martin, Kupper & Johnson, 2007), increased anxiety and depression, emotional reactivity, attention difficulties, and aggression (Chartrand, Frank, White, & Shope, 2008), increased indicators of ambiguous loss (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Glass & Glass, 2007), higher levels of post-traumatic stress and elevated blood pressure (Barnes, Davis, & Treiber, 2007), behavioral difficulties (Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, Jaycox, & Scott, 2008; Huebner et al., 2007), poor academic performance (Chandra et al., 2008; Huebner & Mancini, 2005), and increased irritability (Huebner & Mancini, 2005). Research conducted with military spouses during war time deployment concluded that parental stress was the best predictor of school-age children's psychosocial functioning (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009). While these studies are helpful in understanding the current issue, they have tended to focus more on outcomes rather than on the processes linked to them.

Research conducted with non-military related youth suggests that adolescents under stress are more likely to employ maladaptive coping strategies (Wadsworth & Compas, 2002). It also suggests that adolescent adaptation is positively influenced by various social supports (Willis, 1986).
Adolescents are already facing multiple normative stressors including puberty and school transitions (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Parental deployment may necessitate additional stressors such as relocation (especially if both parents are deployed, or the adolescent is from a single parent family), changes in family roles, and routines. These changes may be especially pronounced for adolescents in National Guard and Reserve families for whom, prior to 9/11 extended deployments were not common. These additional stressors may task the adolescents’ limited coping resources beyond their capacity.

**A Conceptual framework on Resilience and Vulnerability**

This research was mainly guided by the Double ABC-X Model of Adjustment and Adaptation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Patterson & McCubbin, 1987; Patterson, 2002). This framework provides the organizing structure for the presentation of our findings. In this model the “A” refers to the stressor or situation, “B” refers to existing resources, “C” refers to the perception of “A” and “X” refers to the result (for example, difficulty in problem-solving, ability to make changes, etc.) . For our sample, the most observable stressor (“A”) is the deployment of a parent, though we also recognize that for adolescents this age there are a number of normative developmental stressors as well (for example, fitting in with the peer group). The combination of this unusual stressor and the normative stressors fits with the pile-up part of the model. Existing resources (“B”) are addressed in this study by a focus on informal and formal support networks that adolescents access. The perceptions and cognitions (“C”) that adolescents have about their situations and about the deployment (“A”) is reflected in our focus on asking adolescents to talk about deployment expectations and feelings during each phase of the deployment process. In this model, “X” represents a series of outcomes, or results from experiencing and managing the stressor. In addition to the fact that it focuses on stress and coping mechanisms, this model is particularly appropriate for studying adolescents in military families because it was originally developed to examine family resiliency in the face of war.

**Purpose and Parameters of this Study**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the many dimensions of the deployment experiences of adolescents in military families, so that military and civilian program professionals could be more intentional and directed regarding developing support programs for young people. Questions used in the study (see Appendix A) were far-ranging and provided opportunities for all participants to express their experiences.

**Participants**

Study participants were 85 adolescents ranging in age from 11-18 years. Gender representation was about equal (50.6% female, 49.4% male). Ethnicity was reported as 73% White, 11% African-American, 2% Hispanic/Latino, 4% as Asian, 1% as Native American, and 8% as biracial. Active duty service representation included 26% Army, 4% Navy, 8% Air Force, 2% Coast Guard and 8% Marines; 44% of participants had parents in the National Guard (all services), and 2% in the Reserves (all services), 7.1% had parents in multiple services and 2% were not sure of their parent’s service affiliation, while 1% reported no affiliation. Only 6% (n=5) participants reported that their mother was the parent who was or had been deployed.
Participants were asked to estimate how many deployments they had experienced. It is important to note that some adolescents seemed unclear as to what constituted a deployment. Some spoke of time away at training as a deployment; others limited their response to number of times in combat. We reviewed the transcripts and operationalized "deployment" as being deployed overseas in Iraq or Afghanistan. Using this definition, 45% of respondents reported experiencing one deployment, 24% as multiple deployments, and 21% as no deployments (though had experienced parental separation due to temporary duty assignments or training demands that took them away).

Adolescents were identified via their attendance in one of several camps sponsored by Operation Military Kids (OMK; see Huebner, et al., 2009, for a description of Operation Military Kids) designed for youth with deployed military parents and through State 4-H Military Liaisons (a partnership between USDA Cooperative Extension and the U.S. Military). Study methods were evaluated and approved by the Institutional Review Board (human subjects) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Each adolescent provided proof of parental consent prior to participation, as well as their own informed assent. Adolescents could withdraw at any time during the focus group discussions. OMK camps in Florida, Maine, North Carolina, and Ohio elected to participate in the study. A group of Military affiliated adolescents attending an American Legion leadership event in Pennsylvania were also included.

Methodology and Data Analyses

Each of the 11 focus group sessions was comprised of 6-10 adolescents and lasted approximately 70 minutes. Questions focused on determining their experience with the deployment cycle, the elements of the Double ABCX model, attachment styles, and their formal and informal support networks. Focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed.

Qualitative data analyses were conducted using Atlas.ti software (Scientific Software, 2004). Data analysis was conducted by a six-person research team, led by the Principal Investigators. The six person team was divided into two coding teams. Each team independently coded the focus group transcriptions using primary codes adapted from the focus group question categories. Each team reviewed the others codes and discrepancies were noted and discussed. This process was repeated until consensus was achieved. Reports of each primary code were reviewed and subsequent subcategories were developed using a similar consensus-building strategy.

In this report we cite broad patterns of respondent experiences, rather than exceptional cases. Since our approach is not quantitative we are not able to take a “regression” approach, one that more clearly indicates which of the many issues are primary. Experiences of our respondents are diverse, suggesting a range of statuses regarding coping and well-being. Subsequent quantitative research can learn from our broad observations about stress and coping, risk and resilience, and construct more precise approaches to adolescent adjustment. What we have captured is the panoply of adolescent experiences when a parent is deployed or redeployed, information that serves as catalysts for actions among professionals to support families. We present these research findings in their own words, and through their own eyes.
Deployment begins well before any physical separation occurs. The moment the Service member finds out he or she will be going away, changes in the family begin. How adolescents are being informed about an impending deployment and prepared for the changes that may occur in their families emerged as an important factor in understanding adolescent adjustment to deployment.

**How the Adolescent was Informed.** Both the way the adolescent was informed about the impending deployment and the timing of the disclosure seemed related to the adolescents' adjustment. Adolescents who reported they were informed about the deployment via a family discussion in which they were able to voice their concerns and have questions answered seemed better able to adjust to the news. On the other hand, those adolescents who found out their parent was being deployed from other family members, or indirectly from people outside of their family seemed to have more difficulty.

"My dad when he was going to leave for Iraq, he had, he told my mom first and then one night they decided to tell us, so they had a group meeting. We went to our family room, and they just talked about it. He knew when he was leaving. He told us when he was leaving, and we kind of... Like a couple of days before he left we threw a party for him for when he was leaving. It was kind of sad, but then we actually, we... It was actually kind of cool. He left first six months to go train”

"My dad. He wouldn't talk about it. He found out like a couple of days after like the whole unit kept planning out, oh, we're going here, no, we're going here, and he wouldn't even talk about it and then I heard my mom and my grandma talk about it. So, that’s how I found out.”

"I kind of learned the hard way... Because, there was a rumor, I thought they were wrong, but there was a rumor in my neighborhood that my dad was going to Iraq for a year and my parents told me he would never go, and I was like, ‘no,’ and one day we had neighbors that moved in and they pulled in our driveway and she was like, are you the one that has the dad that's going to Iraq? And I'm like, ‘no.’ And she goes, ‘Are you sure? Is your dad in the Army?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, well, he's in the National Guard, but same thing.’ And she said, ‘Oh, can I talk to your dad?’ I kind of got worried then. Then my dad, they told me and I was kind of mad...”

**Timing of Disclosure.** The amount of notice adolescents were given about the impending deployment varied greatly. Determining optimum timing for such disclosures is difficult. In some cases, adolescents reported that their parent starting talking about the potential for deployment literally years before it was to occur. Both of these extreme approaches seemed to serve as additional stressors for adolescents. Those adolescents whose parents told them within a few weeks or months of deployment appeared to fare best in terms of adjustment.
“…It kind of ruins two years because, like, one year when we found out about it, it’s like, it’s going up to the point that he’s leaving and it’s, like, lining everything up and figuring out everything and it’s like doing all this stuff before he leaves…”

“Before my dad leaves, he tells me to be the man of the house because he's gone for like six to eight months at a time, and he tells us, like, two or three weeks in advanced so we have time to get over it.”

**Making Meaning of the Experience.** Adolescents often tried to make sense of their parent’s deployment. The meaning they make or the ‘story’ they tell themselves about the experience is often linked to how well they adjust to the experience.

“You've gotta live your life, I mean, like he's living his, he's got to do his job, just be proud of what you have and what we live in here. We have it the best of any country in the world and that's why, because of people like him.”

“I think it's, you know, you gotta do what you gotta do, you know. We're proud of her for serving her country and all the other military families and parents and so, you know, stuff happens, so we'll be supportive. It's hard, but it’s her job.”

**PARENTS AS RESOURCES**

**Family Time/Rituals.** Adolescents provided a number of examples of how their family prepared for the deployment separation. In some cases, this included spending more time together. In other cases, adolescents reported that their parents seemed to deny the reality of the situation. Those adolescents whose reported intentional time together as a family seemed to recall this experience as very positive. They talked about presents given to them by their deployed parent prior to deployment, and referenced treasuring these gifts. Conversely, other adolescents talked about their parents’ unwillingness to talk about the impending deployment. These adolescents reported a sense of being emotionally cut-off from parents and voiced frustration over not being able to acknowledge what was happening.

“We usually, usually my dad, usually my dad is always deployed so before he gets deployed we usually have, me and my brothers, we each have our own special day where he will take us out to do whatever we wanted with him.”

“Before my dad left we went to Build a Bear, and we got this teddy bear, and we all got a bear and we did there was like ten second things and he said how much he loved us and stuff like that. So, we usually play that every night.”

“[Before deployment], my dad already shut out us.”

“My mom is the type that stays in denial until it actually happens. So, she likes to make it seem like nothing, like my dad is on a long vacation instead of actually deployed or whatever. She tries to keep things as normal as possible, which I don’t see how it’s going to be normal since I'm
starting my freshman year. And I'm used to having my dad there the first day, but he won't be there.”

**ADJUSTMENT**

**Coping Strategies.** Adolescents talked about a variety of ways they attempted to deal with the impending deployment. For example, in some cases, adolescents reported that they intentionally stopped themselves from connecting with their parent before they left for deployment. They reported that this was their way of protecting themselves from the stress of being separated. In some cases, they refrained from sharing their feelings with their deployed parent prior to deployment. These adolescents explained this by saying that they wanted to avoid placing unnecessary stress on their parent so that the parent could focus on his/her job in the military. Some adolescents reported learning to suppress their feelings from their parents, either directly or indirectly. Others learned not to talk about their feelings through growing up in a military family, and reported not expressing emotion was a part of the military culture and creed. These adolescents noticed similar reactions in their other family members as well.

“When he came home from, like, his [month-long] training [prior to leaving for actual deployment]...we were excited to see him or whatever. It almost felt like you didn't, like, connect again. He was home like physically, but he wasn't because you didn't want to get like attached to him again. So, like, there was a lot of stuff like, oh, this happened, you had so much to tell him, but it was like you didn't want to get so attached again that it was emotional, like, leaving again....”

"Don't like always show your emotions like when they're leaving because that makes them sad that you're leaving them and it makes them want to cry also. Well, [I learned that] because the first time when he deployed out to [location], I was feeling really sad and I started crying a lot and he looked at me and started crying.”

"...Never show when you're feeling upset. You've been raised around an army family your whole entire life, your both parents are kind of in it, and like your brothers, you know, handle it your own way."

"I told him most of the stuff that I felt, but not everything in case it made him feel like, 'Oh, gosh, I'm making everyone so upset I shouldn't do this.' So, I just told him, like, some of it not all of it."

"Yeah. Like an awkward stress. Like nothing we've ever felt before. My whole family was like they told me not my brother. And my dad don't like, they avoid the situation of talking about the Army because they don't really know what to think about it because we had someone that was really close...die, and my dad had to go through this thing with the whole family like kind of fall apart seeing it happen. He just doesn't want that to happen."
DEPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES

Deployment is the time when the service member actually leaves the United States to go to overseas. It is important to note, however, that in some cases, mobilizations and trainings were frequently mentioned alongside deployments and were often left undifferentiated especially by adolescents. Deployment becomes a clear marker of separation from the family. It also marks the increased opportunity for injury or death.

PARENTS AS RESOURCES

Attachment Security with Non-Deployed Parent: Parents often serve as a 'secure base' for young people, a person they can count on to make them feel emotionally or physically safe when they are feeling stressed or unstable. Deployment separation in and of itself is a stressful event. Adolescents talked about at-home (non-deployed) parents who were able to cope successfully with the deployment experience and compensate for the loss of their co-parent. Adolescents reported these at-home parents were able to reassure them and provide support for them. Adolescents who reported that their at-home parent continued to be their primary source of attachment security and support also tended to report better overall adjustment to the experience. Conversely, adolescents who reported that their at-home parents seemed depressed, distant, argumentative, or unavailable for support reported feeling neglected or emotionally disconnected.

“She tried to do like her work and my dad's work, like, she tried to make sure I was doing everything and stuff. Double up on making sure everything was done.”

She always tells me that she's there for whenever I need her, if I need to talk to her about anything.

“I usually feel a lot closer to my mom because I know that if something like happens, like, a snake was in the backyard or something and it's like more than three foot, I'm not going to be able to take it, because it will be able to strike me even from six feet away from it, it'll still be able to strike me. I know my mom will know what to do and how to handle it.”

“My mom was in school so she really didn't have time for her kids...I can't speak for like my brothers and sisters, but from what they kind of showed, my mom grew distant from them. Like, she'd lock herself in her room at night and like for hours she wouldn't come out and just cry.”

“My mom didn't know how to handle it [the deployment] so I was always at the babysitter’s, and she would work more and try to avoid the situation because she had three kids like real young. She didn't know what to do.”

“She doesn't seem all there. She seems just a little distant.”
Staying Connected with Deployed Parent. Adolescents reported communication with deployed parents was an important part of coping. They admitted however, to sometimes 'censoring' the information they shared with that parent, either out of concern for their deployed parents' well-being (i.e. didn't want them to worry) or out of self preservation (they didn't want to get themselves in trouble!). Some adolescents reported almost daily contact while others reported going for months at a time with no communication. Adolescents reported use of webcams, instant messaging, and email to communicate with their parents, noting that the technology was great when it worked and extremely frustrating when it did not. In some cases, adolescents reported jealousy over the amount of time their at-home parent got to talk on the phone with the deployed parent compared to the amount of time they got to talk with the deployed parent--calling it 'unfair.' In general, adolescents who were able to stay connected to their deployed parent reported feeling closer to them throughout the deployment.

“I still feel close to my dad because I talk to him like every day on the phone and he sends me letters and I do like the video chat on the computer thing.”

“We talked, we communicated all the time. He had Skype and MSN Messenger. I hooked him up with it before he left, and so whenever he was on-line, we could talk to him and Instant Message him and he’s gotten pretty computer savvy...When my mom finally got over the fact that you don’t have to sit at home waiting for him to call--that you can just Instant Message him--then we were good.”

“[When my dad is] in Afghanistan, [I don’t get to talk to him as] much, because he can only like call once a month like he used to be. And I couldn’t really talk to him because mom always wanted to talk to him, “Give me the phone! [mom says].”

“I miss him and I can't wait to get to the computer to see if he's on there. I'll go up and read the letters that he wrote me before and everything.”

“Like I feel close every time I email him and stuff.”

“... I think I remember it was hard to cope with it because my mom had just started nursing school and so we didn't really have time for each other she was working and homework. I think one of the ways I coped is I wrote a letter to my dad every single night.”

“[During the webcam I'd ask my dad] Yeah, are you okay? He'll be like, yeah, I'm fine, but I know he’s really not because like the little web cam thing you can see his face, and he wasn't liking it....Every time they do the web cam I try not to be around or nothing because I don't really want to see him like that....Because I know, like, he's having a hard time over there so I don't want to see him mad and upset and stuff.”
ADOLESCENTS AND CHANGE

Taking on New Roles and Responsibilities. During deployment, families often find themselves trying to figure out how to adjust to the deployed parent’s absence, including filling the responsibilities and the role the deploying parent held before they departed. Adolescents are at an age where they may take on more of those responsibilities to help out the family, as well as contribute in other ways to aid in their family’s adjustment. For example, adolescents reported they assumed more caretaking responsibilities for their younger siblings (e.g., babysitting, making meals, transporting) and emotional support in dealing with deployment and some of the changes in their families. Those adolescents who reported taking on a parental role in their families voiced concern about the overall welfare of their family, especially their at-home parent. Adolescents said they took on this role in order to help their at-home parent.

Adolescents had differing explanations for why they took on certain responsibilities in their families. In some cases, adolescents reported being assigned a specific role in their family during the deployment, and they seemed to take it seriously (e.g., “be the man of the house”). Others seemed to take the initiative to assume certain roles based on a need they saw in their families (e.g., making dinner, helping other family members cope). Some adolescents reported an increase in the amount of responsibilities they had during deployment, and did not report feeling overwhelmed by them, suggesting that they were carrying a developmentally appropriate load. Alternatively, other adolescents mentioned having to give up some of their personal interests to be able to help their families. This seemed mostly due to the at-home parent not being able to logistically manage the household (e.g. due increased time at work or a desire to be away).

“My brother was ... just about like one, around that age, and so my dad really all he said was 'I'm leaving it up to you, you need to take care of them, take care of your mother and your brother....' Which, kind of I know he had that respect, but I didn't know he would ever drop it on me... [It] kind of gave me that good, but bad feeling like yippee, oh, crap.”

“[During the deployment] my sister started talking a lot to me. She started talking and trying to hang out with me more...Trying to get somebody to be with her because mom can't always be there.”

“Well, when he was deployed, I felt very insecure, and I didn't really know how to deal with it and then ever since then I try to suck it up for my brother... I have to try to be brave for my brother...”

“And it makes it so we have to sacrifice more like we can't do everything, like, all the sports and stuff.”

“So, and I usually didn’t hang out with them [siblings], you know because my dad was there, but when he left, we got closer and I usually watch them like when they have lacrosse games and stuff like that, I usually can go watch them.”
“My sister started talking a lot to me. She started talking and trying to hang out with me more. Trying to get somebody to be with her because mom can't always be there and whenever he went the first time, she had, she was doing the family readiness.”

SIBLINGS

Changes in Relationship with Siblings. In many cases, adolescents reported becoming closer to their siblings as a result of their parents’ absence. Adolescents noted that their siblings were the only ones who understood what they were experiencing. They also noted that siblings were a source of support if the at-home parent withdrew or had difficulty with the deployment. On the other hand, in a few cases, the adolescents reported that the added stress of the deployment strained their relationship with their siblings. These youth reported avoiding relationships with siblings during deployment, not talking as much and spending less time together than they had before deployment.

“Yeah. I tell my sister more things than I tell my mom.”

“... I got closer to my brother [during deployment]... Like me and my brother are best friends.”

“My brother and I, we weren't really close because he's four years older than I am, but he kind of gave up some stuff that he really liked to do in order to watch me, and so we became really close...”

“Well, my sister, she tried to be my parent, and it kind of, and it kind of didn't work. That made us not get along anymore because it kind of made me upset...Because she tried to act like my parent, and I felt real bad for my mom.”

EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS

Proxy Parents. In some cases, adolescents reported that extended family members (such as grandparents) assumed some of the supportive roles of parenting. Adolescents spoke of extended family members serving as resources by moving in with families during deployment, providing daycare, meals, and emotional support for the at-home parent and the adolescent, and by celebrating with the family upon the deployed parent’s return. When family members were used as resources to relieve the additional stress on the family over the course of deployment, adolescents reported that they and their at-home parents fared better.

“So our nana, when my dad left, our nana kind of took his place because she was over there. But when my dad came back it's like they switched again when my dad was there. And, you know, we see our nana a lot, too. So, she's still there.”

“I don't really spend that much time with mom because she works two jobs. So, she drops us off at my grandma's house or we stay home with the dog and I stay with my sisters and we watch television and stuff so we don't get to see her too often because she usually doesn't get back until eleven o'clock and I'm asleep by then so, yeah.”
“[I go to my grandmother for support] because like she always tells me that it's all right, it's okay, like nothing will happen or whatever, and she will help me go through bad times.”

“I guess we got closer, but she in the middle had to change jobs or whatever, and so her job had her traveling a lot. So, I always had to stay at my grandmother’s house on the weekends instead of with her which is where I wanted to be, but she couldn't do anything. She couldn't take me, and it really hurt. I was always at my grandmother’s, and she’s getting older and whatever, so she couldn't do much, so I basically just sit there.”

“I usually have people to talk to, but while he was gone, they weren’t really there. I usually talk to my family but I couldn’t talk to my dad because he was on a whole separate continent. My sister, she was a lot older than me so she understood more. And she was very quick to anger while he was gone. So of course she ended up yelling at me which would just make it worse. My mom was never available because she was always working or in school or studying. My grand dad was like ancient, so he just slept most of the time. So and I tried to go to friends, but I just, we had just moved there like a year ago, so I hadn’t made , I hadn’t developed a really good relationship with any friends yet. So I really didn’t have anyone to talk to.”

Support Based on Perception of Shared Experience. Adolescents reported seeking out extended family members who had experience with military life or with deployment. Adolescents also reported seeking out same-gendered family members, especially in cases when their same-gendered parent was deployed. Adolescents reported benefiting from talking with someone who had shared their experience and could provide advice or comfort.

“Usually when, I don’t have no friends whose dad is deployed. I have one other friend whose dad is in the military, but he doesn’t deploy very often. So, like most of my friends don’t know anything that I’m going through or how it feels, but like, I don’t know, sometimes I just talk to my grandma or something because she was in the government work or whatever. So, she knew what it felt like for my mom and stuff.”

“My Godfather he's real, I can open up to him so it's nice to have and they live close by so it's nice to have somebody else that I can go talk to that's like a father . . . When my dad's gone, uhm, I usually hang out with my Godfather. A lot more. A lot more, because mom knows that I need that time with another man.”

“I have a family member, my cousin, who is here and his dad is, he trained and teaches the soldiers for Iraq and all of that. He hasn't been deployed for a while and next year he's going for about four months and so while either my step dad or his dad is gone, we just go and hang out and do what we normally do.”

FRIENDS

Confiding in Friends. Adolescents reported a range of experiences when it came to confiding in their friends. Some reported that friends were a source of meaningful support. This seemed especially true when those friends also had experience with deployment. Other adolescents reported they did not want to tell friends about their parents’ deployments. These adolescents
reported having experienced or being worried about friends not believing them or accusing them of attention-seeking. This seemed especially true for youth in National Guard and Reserve families. These adolescents also stated they did not want “pity” or “sympathy” from friends. They also reported annoyance when others tried to act as though they understood the deployment experience though the friend did not have a parent in the military.

“Because like it was always over a school year or whatever, and so like I'd tell my closest friends and maybe a couple of teachers, but I have to be careful who I tell because I don't want everybody knowing because then everybody is going to be like, oh, feeling sad or whatever and then there's times when I just had a break down in the middle of school and everybody is like, ‘What's wrong?’ And you want to tell them, but you can't because you think they're going to say, ‘Oh, I know how you feel,’ but really they don't unless they've been through it before and they haven't. [crying]

“I went to a friend. He's like 18 right now, and he's done it, his dad has actually deployed four times, and I would used to go to him for, you know, support and all of that and it was cool because we'd actually go out, you know, to the baseball park or something.”

“My friends don’t support me in anything...They don’t believe me [about the deployment]... Like, I tried telling them when my mom left. And they were like, ‘No, you're just saying that for attention...’

“I’ve known my friend since we were in second grade. Her name’s Allie, and she, I mean she supports me and everything...So, if I get, you know, if I start crying, she helps me get through it, and we help each other a lot, so we’re really good friends.”

“It's just that, it's like they do the whole, ‘Oh, I know what you're going through’ thing, but really they don't because I've got a friend her dad's a police officer...But he works like nights or whatever so she says there’s sometimes... I’m like, ‘Okay, you get to see your dad when you wakeup. I don't get to see my dad at all until he comes back on leave.’”

”...It's hard to go to, like, peers at my school, but I do have like a lot of friends out of school. So like I talk to them and stuff like that and there's a couple of people in school that know where I'm coming from."

**PETS**

Pets were often cited as an important source of support for adolescents during parental deployment. Adolescents reported that it was often easier to “confide” in a pet than it was in another person. They noted that their pets seemed to understand their distress and be sympathetic to their situations.

“And when he was gone, I had my dog, [name] She’s a husky. I would just talk to her, and she would make me feel better...”

"Talking to animals is really good. They don’t have comments on anything other than meow."
“I don't really talk to my dad so I just go to one of our pets and just let everything out.”

“I really didn't go to anybody. I went to my dog... I'd sit on my bed and talk to my dog... he can't talk back... He understands kind of.”

“I kept it to myself or my cat because he always, uhm, he just comes and actually when I was feeling sad or crying or anything like that, he would come up and start purring and giving kisses.”

“Because, like animals, they can tell when you're sad or anything so they come up and cuddle with you and stuff.”

FORMAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Role of Formal Programs. Adolescents reported being aware of several formal supports and making use of them for social, psychological and family support during deployment. These formal supports included support groups for military teens, professional counselors or therapists, camps for adolescents with a deployed parent, youth services programs and sports clubs. They provide the structure within which personal relationships can form. Adolescents reported that involvement in such programs often helped them adjust to and cope with a parent’s absence during deployment.

“ I was closer to my daycare provider. I thought she was more my mom than my actual mom because she taught me everything. My dad was gone and my mom like worked more because she didn’t want to deal with it.”

“Well, usually when he deploys it’s during the school, so at school we have a program for deployed, for kids with deployed parents so I usually go to that.”

“And I'm also on like a Guard Panel kind of thing, but it's for my state. Like, we have a youth council and we also have this thing called [name omitted...]. And we get together, we have camps, we have activities every, like, every drill weekend we have groups of kids get together on days while their parents are doing their drill weekend, and we just hang out and have fun and plan events for other military kids and go over to the other side of our state and have events. Like, I’m going to be spending like two weeks in March and April, like, over in[city] just doing military stuff and hanging out with friends and people that I connect with through the military.”

“And definitely family programs are a great thing to get into. They really make you feel like family. You develop great friends and go to camp.”

“You should try to go to OMK or OCP because if you go to Operation Military Kids or Operation Camp Purple and you will make friends and you can tell them what's happening, you can make friends and you can call them or email them and it'll be a lot easier for you because you have more friends and you can talk to them a lot.
“I do football because like because we usually have tackling dummies or something, and I just try with all my might to hit it and usually break it.”

“Yes. And I see a counselor also just because of, like, all the family just because of how hectic it is so everyone in our family talks to someone kind of thing. And so we have like a family counselor that we also go see, like, every few weeks just to touch up and see what’s going on and to help with communication.”

**ADJUSTMENT**

**Family Climate.** In some cases, adolescents reported an increase in the amount of conflict among family members. The adolescents seemed to attribute this in part to increased responsibilities and strains on all family members. In other cases, adolescents viewed the increased conflict as a result of the family denying the reality of the deployed parents’ absence.

“So, she likes to make it seem like nothing, like my dad is on a long vacation instead of actually deployed or whatever.”

“My mom and I we’re the only two at home. My sister was in college at the time and we’re the only ones at home all the time. So, we were at each other all the time. Always, you know, fussing about something and then we decided that was really stupid and then we’d go, you know, any time that while he was gone, any time that he had to do something, we would just, when we were feeling down and out we’d just go do something instead of like staying at home and wallowing in it, we would go eat or go see a movie or something. We tried not to focus on that because there’s really nothing you can do about it. So, I mean why sit there and cry and whine over it because you can’t do anything about it.”

**School Performance.** School performance is often an early indicator of adolescent adjustment. Many adolescents reported a decline in their grades due to deployment. They cited worrying and an inability to concentrate as contributing factors.

“When my dad is not home, I, when he’s home, I usually get grades like A's and B's. When he deploys, I start getting C's and stuff.”

“She had to study all night and me and my sister both had a lot of trouble focusing on school...We both had to see counselors.”

“Yes, like, when my dad, like, it was hard because like I said we were like best friends and it’s not like I can call up to the house and just say, hey, dad, what’s going on? And I was used to him doing that and it was hard like during my time I know that it all got stressful and it was harder than I expected it to be. Like, grades were dropping, social life with my family was getting harder, and then it just went downhill.”

**Ambivalence.** Adolescents indicated feeling multiple feelings simultaneously during deployment. Mixed feelings seemed to occur in situations in which the adolescent was feeling
good, but thought of the deployed parent and began to feel badly. Adolescents also talked about having good and bad days during deployment.

"[Vacation] was pretty, it was fun, but sometimes I'd just sit there and think, what am I doing? Because I felt bad we were going somewhere where he wasn’t."

"And like, sometimes, like, right when they leave, like, just from my experience the day that he left, and for like a month or so it took us like a really long time to get over it, that he was gone, we wouldn’t be seeing him. And I mean, like there was just a lot of crying involved, and like sometimes there was just some days like my mom and I and my brother like we talk a little bit, but we didn’t. And then were just some days, like, they were just happy days, and we just talked and talked, but like I guess it depends on how you’re feeling that day."

**Suppressing Emotions.** Adolescents reported a multitude of reasons for not expressing their feelings during deployment. Some wanted to portray to the world that they were okay and not suffering from the deployment. Others even reported trying not to think about their feelings, because thinking about their negative feelings seemed to exacerbate them. They wanted to share positive things in order to facilitate more conversations with their parents, and pointed to the futility of expressing their negative emotions, as it did not bring their deployed parent home. They also said that they avoided difficult emotional conversations because of the potential for “bringing down” either parent or other family members. Again, some adolescents reported the message to suppress their feelings came directly or indirectly from their parents, while others felt the need to protect their parents by keeping their feelings to themselves.

“I used to go to like my mom or my grandma to talk to them, but like I saw that I started making them like sadder when I started crying or something. So, I just started like talking to myself or I’ll talk to like one of my friends. They wouldn't know what to say because they didn’t know so I just keep it in and getting over it.”

"...I really don't like show my feelings, I just hide it, let other people see, hey, if he's not afraid that his dad is going to get hurt because he knows his dad is strong then why should I be afraid?"

"I don't really go to my mom as much because I don't want to stress her out, like, with because I don't want to get her down because then like, you know, she might not have been worrying about it, but then, like, if I say something then it could bring her down and, you know, you just kind of try to keep everyone on a positive note."

Adolescents reported they withheld negative things that occurred at home (e.g., sibling conflicts, decreased academic performance, necessary home repairs) from their deployed parent in an effort to protect them from worrying.

"...My mom said to make my dad feel happy... it'll make it bad if he worries, he'll lose concentration."
Resilience and Vulnerability of Youth

"...Sometimes I feel like if you don't talk about, like, the good things with him and stuff like that that he won't want to talk to you again. Like I've had that feeling before. Just like it seems that the talking about bad things, or, would bring him down so much that he just wouldn't really have interest in trying to, like, connect with you or just like that because it would make him feel sad and you don't want to be sad kind of thing."

“...They don't want to hear that, they don't want to hear how horrible it is. They want to know that you're keeping your life going while they're gone.... it's hard enough on them, like, not being there, but when they know that it's not going right because they're not there, it just makes it a hundred percent worse. So, you've gotta make do with what you got.”

RETURN AND REINTEGRATION EXPERIENCES

The reintegration phase poses many challenges for military families. Whether the changes that have occurred both at home and for the deployed service member are acknowledged influences the ability of the family to cope with this transition. Reconnecting to one another is also an important part of this phase.

Changes in Deployed Parent. Adolescents reported a multitude of changes in their deployed parent when he/she returned home. In some cases, adolescents described their deployed parents as more angry, more depressed, more withdrawn socially, more distant from their families, or dazed and mentally absent. These adolescents reported being confused by these changes and seemed to have difficulty understanding why their parent had changed. Alternatively, other adolescents reported that their deployed parent return happier, more emotionally present, and nicer. Finally, other adolescents reported that their deployed parent fit back into the family easily and perceived them as being back to their “normal” self.

“It seemed like my dad is happier and wants to spend more time with us. It's kind of different from what he used to be like.”

“When my dad came back, he was more cheerful totally. My dad is not one of those people who like really, he's down to earth, but he's a marine so he has that big, mean look to him. He came back, and it was different. He trusted me more.”

“She'll sleep for three days and become completely normal again.”

“He wasn’t there. Emotionally.”

“When my dad came home, we had to adjust to him being home and my dad has always been funny and goofy, but when he first came home he was really serious, and we didn't know why.”

“When he came home like he was a lot more, I don't really know the word but like if he saw anything like bloody or anything like that, like he wouldn't be able to look at it. And he wouldn't tell us why for the longest time, but he just told me a couple of weeks ago that it's just because of the stuff he saw over there he'll never get out of his mind. He said he can’t listen to certain songs anymore because when he was like, fighting, he was a lot more serious, he got put on a lot of
depression medicine and talked to a lot of counselors. He figured out who his real friends were, they had his back the whole time.”

“Last time my dad was deployed one of his friends was killed so he came back with anger management problems. It kind of scared me because if I did one little thing bad, I’d get into a lot of trouble, but he's in therapy and so it was kind of hard dealing with that . . . My mom had to keep everything from him, I mean not little things, but big things from him, like, I don't know, but he's getting better.”

“When my dad gets back, it's like the first month or so there's like this dazed where he can't get with it because he's used to being over there like where all the battlefields so he's not used to be around his kids and stuff. He just like looks rough and he looks like he's been through a lot and last time he deployed and came back he had a shooting game and he would sit on the computer and play that like all day. That's what he was used to and usually that's how it goes the first month. After that he'll like start to get back into it and start talking to us a lot more, but he still can't like tell us what he did over there so we don't know what he actually went through. All we know is that he went through something and it made him upset. You would just see like this blank look in his eye. Usually he has a lot of emotion in his face. And when he came back he just had like this stare like he didn't know what was going on or anything. I guess because of what happened over there, you know, it was like scary. Usually the little things we would do that would get on his nerves. He didn't like recognize it if we didn't like clean up, he wouldn't care. He would go on about his business like nothing happened. And that wasn't usual; wasn't used to that. I was scared. I didn't know what was wrong with him. I thought something had happened and he was hurt or something. But when he started coming out of it, I felt better.”

Renegotiating Family Roles. In some cases, adolescents reported a struggle reintegrating their parent into the family because of the shift in roles and responsibilities that had taken place in their absence. Adolescents recounted seeing one parent assume the role of two during deployment. In some cases, adolescents said this led to parental conflict over the division of roles and responsibilities once the deployed parent returned home. Some adolescents reported feeling resentful that their deployed parent did not recognize how much they had matured during the course of deployment, how much more responsibility they were ready for. Reintegration was also reportedly problematic when the deployed parent could not separate his/her role of “warrior” from that of parent.

“I remember when my dad came home, like would come home from different things he would feel kind of useless and out of place because we had been functioning for that period of time, like, without him. We had learned, we had made new routines, and he didn't know where he fit into the routines. Like, we would have certain schedules to do things and to get stuff done so that our house would run somewhat smoothly, but when he would come home he would try to, like, help out or like interject or try to fix things, but I remember just, I remember my step mom being just the first few weeks after he would be back, she would just kind of, she wouldn't know what to do. She was, like, because he tried to help, but she thinks, I remember her saying that sometimes it's not helping in a way, it's kind of making it more of a hassle because we've been doing it this way for this amount of time and now you're back and you're trying to help and it's just not working
kind of thing, but, like, eventually you just end up adjusting, re-adjusting to him being back and you make new routines and new schedules.”

“When my mom came back, it was really different because I wasn’t used to her being around so when she, like, first started to try to talk to me I was like really uptight and I wouldn’t want to talk to her because I wasn’t used to her being here. She would try to find some stuff and I would tell her that’s not how we do it or that’s not how dad does it, and she would get upset, but I wouldn’t know it and me and my brother just treated her really differently because we weren’t used to her being around. So, our relationship changed really a lot for the first couple of months that she first came back from Iraq.”

“When my dad first got back, my mom's lifestyle had changed since he had been gone because she was so much more lackadaisical with me being out. When my dad got home, my parents fought a lot just because of the differences because my dad, like being overseas with the Army for 15 months, he lived that strict life and that’s what he tried to bring home, and my mom wasn’t putting up with it.”.

“I could tell that there was like some animosity between the two of them because [my mom] was getting the attention [from the twins] and [my dad] just wasn't. And then I think it made it harder on me when he was gone because I had to assume, I had to like, take a parental role kind of thing.”

“My dad was a staff sergeant, and he had to yell a lot, too. So, when he got home, the first day that I said he was like yelling at everything, and like he even yelled at mom a few times and my mom was kind of upset with him, and then the next day they had like this talk and everything and everything was okay, and I was kind of happy about that.”

**Reconnecting.** Adolescents reported reconnecting with their deployed parent through sharing what had happened while the deployed parent was away. Adolescents also reconnected by spending special time with the deployed parent or by being part of special family events, like family parties.

“We usually have every morning like cereal and fruit, but my dad and me we get up early, the two of us, and we would basically, we normally have like cinnamon rolls every Sunday morning before we go to church. We had cinnamon rolls or pancakes we have like on Saturdays or Sundays, every single day for weeks [after deployment] just because we were so happy.”

“We pretty much, basically I missed about a week of school that I should, uhm, that most people were asking, oh, did you get sick and were just being mean when my dad just got back, and it was really special because we were doing all sorts of things. We were doing things that we normally never would do. Yeah, we went places that we normally don't go because it's too expensive or we don't have time, but we made time. Like we cancelled things that we, like we got special permission from our things we would go to just to do stuff, and I thought it was really neat.”
ADJUSTMENT

Emotionality. Adolescents reported a wide range of emotional reactions to reintegration. In some cases, they reported that this myriad of mixed emotions was confusing. Some reported feeling disillusioned in that the reunion was more difficult than expected. Others reported complete happiness at being reunited. Many reported experiencing both positive and negative emotions at the same time. In some cases, it seemed the adolescents had a difficult time trusting that the returning parent was really home to stay.

"It was hard, I mean the first feeling I had was he’s home, you know, and everything’s going to be great. And then it just sort of got awkward and I mean he doesn’t talk about it. He, to this day the only thing he mentions how frustrated he is with the world. He would go back to work, he worked 24 hours and just disappeared I remember before he would go I remembered crying. Afraid he wouldn’t come back.”

"I kind of shared everything. I just kind of didn't tell him that... I didn't exactly tell him that I was upset that he was gone. I just kind of told him that I was happy that he was okay, and he didn't get hurt or anything. That's like what we talked about. I didn't tell him what I really felt like. I didn't, I didn't tell him that I cried a lot. I didn't tell him how my life changes. I didn't tell him that.”

MULTIPLE DEPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES

Multiple deployments are the norm for many of today's military families. Adolescents varied in their reports of their experience with multiple deployments. Adolescents indicated that multiple deployments were easier on the family because they knew what to expect. Adolescents indicated that the fear of the unknown diminishes with each subsequent absence. On the other hand, other adolescents indicated that while they knew what to expect, the total time of a parent’s absence from the family accumulates and creates difficulties.

“The first time my dad left we were more worried about him, you know, seeing if he was going to come back or not, and he did and now since he's gone, we’re not as worried. Like it wasn't that as emotional as the first time, and my dad basically just left this time.”

“I think the more times that he leaves the easier it gets kind of thing because, like, the first few times it's a shocker. You're, like, okay, he's gone. What do I do now? But once you've experienced it enough times you're, like, okay, this is normal.”

“The second time it's like you knew what you had to do once he left and it seemed more like you were more used to it and like you didn't have to explain everything like what chores and stuff. You just knew what you were doing and you did it.”

“It was hard the first year, but it was harder the second year because I was older and I knew that, because we had gained like a lot more trust from each other, and you know, got a lot more fun over the years so it was really hard for me second year.”
ADVICE FROM YOUTH IN MILITARY FAMILIES

Advice-giving allows the giver to share personal experience to help others to grow. For adolescents in military families, giving advice is a powerful activity which engages them in collaboration to generate creative ideas, fostering growth within themselves and others. As might be expected, almost all adolescents gave advice that directly related to their own lives, often offering advice they were already following or that they felt they should follow.

“Here’s What I Would Do…” Adolescents gave many suggestions for helping others to cope with an impending deployment. This advice centered around gaining support from others, using rituals or objects, finding distractions, maintaining hope and being brave.

“Tell them to try to do what I did... Basically my mom bought it for me, which was really nice. She just got me about 50 pounds of stuffing and cloth and I basically made a replica of him”

“You need to be ready before you know that you're getting ready. You need to step up and you need to have courage and integrity with you because the more you have that with you the more you're going to be ready.”

“You should, if you know the Army values, you should know those and if you’re failing in school, don’t fail, keep moving. ... I would tell them that they needed to stand strong and they needed to stay a family because if you don’t stand strong, they don't stand Army strong, they are never going to make it through.”

“I would tell them to relax and think about them a lot. That's it. Because if you think about them a lot it seems like he's never left.”

“The advice I would give would be pray to God that he would protect whoever is being deployed and think positive. Don't think like when he gets shot and then there's a chance that he might really get shot.”

“Uhm, you should probably like try to find something to like keep your mind off of it.

“You don't want to keep it inside, you want to eventually tell somebody otherwise it'll just eat away at you and you get sad inside.”

“I think I would give them, before they go off to spend as much time as you can with them you have with them because you don’t know what will happen, so spend as much time and pray for them and just like she said just be close to your friends and find who your real friends are and just vent to your family mostly and vent to like counselors.”

“I would tell them if you miss them that much to where you can’t forget them, call them, email them, send them letters. Do whatever it is to communicate with them.”

“Spend as much time with them as you can.”
“I would encourage you, I would encourage the person just to, like, make connections and, like, not just like with your family member that’s going to leave, but with other kids who are going through the same thing...”

“Get ready [for] anything. ... It's a big burden having your parents gone. You should be more optimistic and less pessimistic. Don't worry about the bad things that could happen to them. Realize that, you know, when the night comes that's one day you're closer to seeing them. Just don't think about the negative things.”

“...Don't worry. Worrying is not going to get you anywhere. It's just going to make your life horrible throughout this experience. Yes, bad things could happen, yes, you can never promise someone that you'll be back, but you can't live your life in what could happen, you have to live in the now. You can't worry about everything, you can't make, you can't prevent anything from happening. It's not going to do you any good to try to cope with what could happen, you just, when you're dealing with deployment, you've got to, you've gotta live, like, your life. You've gotta continue to live every day. You can't freak yourself out about it because if you do, you'll just make it horrible. It's just the most horrible thing in the world.”

“Like it's going to be okay, don't cry, get sad, well, you're going to get sad, but like it's going to be all right.”

**IMPLICATIONS**

Research that captures respondent verbatim accounts of events and experiences are rich in implications for education, prevention, and intervention. This study is no exception, and provides leads for efforts to improve the lives of youth and the military families in which they live. The following implications should provide the raw material for discussions among family support professionals, military family members, and citizens who care about youth in military families. These implications are drawn directly from the perspectives of youth, *in their own words*, and *through their own eyes*.

**Support for Parents**

- Educate parents on appropriate *strategies for coping* with deployment. Talking about the deployment can help normalize the experience for all family members.
- Encourage parents to conduct periodic *family meetings* prior to, during, and after the deployment to discuss changes in roles and responsibilities. Educate parents that adolescents find *security in predictability*.
- Educate parents on the importance of maintaining *consistent expectations and family patterns, activities, and rituals*. If changes to routines must be made, it is helpful to involve adolescents in the discussion.
- Encourage soon-to-be deployed parents to *be available and responsive* to the adolescent before departure. Be willing to discuss the deployment and respond to the adolescent’s questions or concerns. Encourage parents to be intentional about how they would like to spend their pre-deployment time with their adolescent.
Resilience and Vulnerability of Youth

- Inform parents about their opportunities to seek support from formal programs and organizations.
- Educate parents about the impact their level of emotional functioning has on their adolescents. Adolescents need to be reassured by their parent that they are okay in order to feel secure.
- Provide parents with tools and skills in managing their anxieties about deployment, especially at-home parents that have an increased amount of responsibilities to manage while the deployed parent is away.
- Encourage parents to provide updates to the deployed spouse about what is happening in the family and the developmental changes that are happening with the adolescent in order to enable the deployed parent to have realistic expectations of what to expect from their adolescent upon their return.
- Encourage parents to share with their adolescents the reasons for some of the changes they may experience in the deployed parent upon their return. Parents’ explanations should be tailored to be appropriate based on the age of their adolescent.
- Help parents to be mindful of the roles adolescents’ take on during deployment, especially those of older siblings. Encourage parents to consider the developmental appropriateness of the roles and responsibilities their adolescent is fulfilling. Encourage parents to provide opportunities in which adolescents can learn new skills that will aid in their contributions to the family (e.g., baby-sitting, cooking, cleaning, yard work).
- Assist parents to be mindful of their adolescent’s need for attention from them as a result of the other parent’s absence.
- Encourage parents to recognize the range of emotions adolescents may experience during the deployment cycle. Encourage parents to help their adolescent realize these are normal and provide opportunities for these to be expressed openly.
- Encourage parents to work out the details of an extended family member’s involvement over the course of deployment in order to ensure the family member can seamlessly transition into and out of their more supportive role once the deployed parent returns. Help parents understand that while extended family members are valuable supports, they are not replacement parents.
- Because they tend to be more comfortable with other military adolescents, encourage parents to seek out programs that bring their adolescent together with other military adolescents.
- Strongly encourage parents to take care of their emotional health. Assist parents to model appropriate self-care and stress reduction, so that adolescents do not feel responsible for parental emotional well-being. Parents may be unaware of how closely adolescents monitor and mirror parental emotions and behaviors.

Support for Youth

- Educate adolescents on normal and expected responses to having a parent deployed, such as worry and poor concentration. Encourage youth to acknowledge the issue and to seek support as needed—especially as it related to school work.
• Normalize for adolescents the fact that conflicts may arise as a result of a parent’s absence. Encourage them to participate in family meetings to address how everyone is feeling.

• Encourage adolescents to maintain positive friendships and support outside of the family. These can include social networks in school, community, or other organizational settings, especially relationships with other adolescents with deployed parents.

• Help adolescents identify the emotions they are experiencing and express them in appropriate ways. Encourage adolescents to go to their parents with the emotions they are feeling and any questions or concerns they have about the deployment.

• Help adolescents understand that the deploying parent is also under pressure and strain, and therefore requires patience from the adolescent.

• Educate adolescents on what to expect during return and reintegration. Adolescents need to understand what changes they may see in their deployed parent and need to have a developmentally-appropriate understanding of what causes these changes.

• Inform adolescents that there are counselors and activities available, and to seek help if they need it. Assist adolescents to access these services.

• Help adolescents learn strategies for communicating complex feelings, and realize the importance of sharing feelings with parents. Help them understand that the same is not true for parents, as parents are mainly responsible for their own emotional health rather than the adolescent being responsible.

• Encourage adolescents to consider creating an advice blog, writing an advice letter, or keeping an advice diary as coping activities. This ritual can help to document their successes and establish a new method of coping.

• Encourage adolescents to initiate a service activity to provide appropriate distraction from the concerns they have about deployment.

Overall strategies for supporting youth and their families take into account the resilience that resides within military families, and within the systems that are designed to support families. Strategies also account for natural vulnerabilities that accompany the uncertainty that is part of changes within families, as well as changes outside of families. This examination of how youth in military families experience and view these changes provides clues to leverage points that can improve family life. These leverage points become avenues professionals can use to enhance youth and family resilience, and to minimize vulnerabilities.
REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Focus Group Interview Questions
Examining the Effect of Multiple Deployments on Adjustment among Youth in Military Families

Background on Deployment Experience
To begin, we just want to get a sense of who you are and where your parent is in the deployment process. So let’s just go around the circle and have each of you introduce yourself (first name only) and tell us about your current situation with respect to deployment:
1. Who do you live with?
2. Is your parent deployed now? (how long has the parent been away)
3. Which parent is/has been deployed?
4. How many deployments have you experienced?
5. How old were you when your parent was deployed the first time?

I. The Deployment Cycle
Youth and their families go through different phases of deployment: before the parent goes, while the parent is away, and when your parent returns. We’d like to ask you some questions about your experience with this process.
A. We’ll start with what happens BEFORE your parent is deployed.
6. Tell me about how your family prepared for the deployment.
   A. Were there special conversations or discussion about changing responsibilities?
   B. Who did the talking (e.g. both parents together/separate conversations)?
   C. Were there discussions about what the parent would be doing?
7. What else do we need to know about what happens before your parent is deployed?
B. Now let’s talk about what happens DURING the deployment (when your parent is away)
8. How are things in your family (including relationships with brother & sisters, mom) different when your parent is deployed? For example, do you find that you spend more or less time with each other than you did before? Do you notice any changes in how you get along?
9. Tell me about the relationship you have with your at home parent during deployment.
   A. What kinds of things do you talk about?
   B. What things do you keep from him/her?
   C. What kinds of things do you do together?
   D. How close do you feel to this parent?
10. Tell me about the relationship you have with your deployed parent while they are deployed.
    A. What kinds of things do you talk about?
    B. What things do you keep from him/her?
    C. What kinds of things do you do together?
    D. How close do you feel to this parent?
11. What else do we need to know about what happens during the deployment?
C. Now let’s focus on what happens when the deployed parent RETURNS home.
12. Was there anything different about your deployed parent when he/she returned home?
13. What did you notice about how your returning parent “fit” back into the family?
14. After the deployment, what did you notice about your relationship with your deployed parent?
15. After the deployment, what did you notice about your relationship with your at-home parent?
16. What else do we need to know about what happens or what it’s like when your deployed parent returns home?
D. Now we’d like to talk about your experiences with MULTIPLE deployments.
17. Now please remind me which of you have experienced a deployment more than once.
18. For you, what was different about the second (or third) deployment? Did you and your family prepare for it differently than the first? During the second (third) deployment what was different for you? When your parent returned from the second (or third) deployment what was different for you, compared to the first deployment?
E. Now we want to talk to you about who you go to for SUPPORT.
19. Who is the first person you usually turn to for support when you are really sad/scared/ or lonely?
   A. How are they helpful?
   B. Is this the same person you turn to when your parent is deployed?
   C. Does the support you receive from them change over the course deployment?
   D. Do you find that you become the support system for others? If so, who?
II. We will end our discussion with a very important question.
20. If you could give advice to a teen that just found out her/his parent was deploying soon, what would you tell her/him?
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