A School Counseling Approach to Helping Military Families during Deployment

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By: Dawn Marie Spiess

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview, based on the published literature, of the risks and unique challenges that many military families face during the deployment process, a description of the phases of the deployment cycle, and examples of how school counselors can provide prevention and intervention services in order to promote the well being of the whole family. These prevention and intervention examples target children and adolescents as well as their primary care givers. Adlerian approaches to school-based services are incorporated throughout as a way to highlight and promote the strength and resilience of military families.
A School Counseling Approach to Helping Military Families during Deployment

According to March 2012 statistics, over 1.4 million citizens of the United States are currently serving in the armed forces, which include the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard (Department of Defense [DOD]). “More than 1.7 million children in the United States have a parent serving in the military” (Lester et al., 2012, p. S48). The DOD (2012) indicates that 3,700 youth have experienced the death of a military parent and 41,000 have a parent who has suffered a service related injury or illness. Although many military youth are resilient and are able to adaptively cope with deployment, studies have shown deployment to have a negative impact on youth (Lincoln, Swift, & Shorteno-Fraser, 2008). In a survey conducted by the DOD, approximately 23% of spouses of service members reported that their children did not cope well during deployment. Survey results showed a 64% increase in symptoms of anxiety and a 54% decrease in academic performance in children of active duty soldiers. Problem behaviors at school increased in 37% of the children and at home in 57%. Results from reserve member’s spouses showed that 73% of children had increased symptoms of anxiety, and 53% encountered decreased academic performance. With regard to behavioral problems, 34% of reserve member children had higher levels of behavioral problems at school, and 50% experienced increased issues at home.

With multiple and extended deployments and more combat deployments being commonplace in the last decade, the risks to military parents and children has increased (Lester et al., 2012). A 2004 study revealed that almost 33% of deployed soldiers serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) endured multiple or extended deployments (SteelFisher, Zaslavsky, & Blendon, 2008). Higher levels of depression, anxiety, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors have been found in children with a combat zone
deployed parent as compared to children without a deployed parent (Cozza, Chun, & Polo, 2005). In fact, Lincoln et al. (2008) stated that “having a parent sent to an active combat zone with an undetermined return date may rank as one of the most stressful events of childhood” (p. 984). Combat deployment has also been shown to result in higher rates of child maltreatment (Phelps, Dunham, and Lyons, 2010). Cozza et al. (2005) indicated that family cohesiveness tends to decrease for those families who have a loved one deployed to a combat area. This is concerning as a decreased sense of belonging and lack of connection may contribute to behavioral and emotional difficulties (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002).

**Youth Risk Factors and Impacts**

Children and adolescents have been found to experience behavioral, emotional, and academic difficulties during the deployment cycle (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass & Grass, 2007). Several risk factors impact the development of these difficulties. Youth who struggle with mental health issues prior to the deployment of a parent are especially at risk for maladjustment during deployment (Lincoln et al., 2008). A history of family violence, child abuse, and abuse of substances by one’s parents also heightens risk, and studies have shown rates of child abuse, neglect, and maltreatment to increase while a parent is deployed. In a study by Phelps et al. (2010), the standardized test scores of military youth decreased as the length of deployment for their parents increased. Youth from lower-income homes have been shown to perform lower on test scores during a parent’s deployment (Lyle, 2006) as soldiers of lower socioeconomic status were found to be deployed more often than those who were more affluent (Phelps et al., 2010). Lyle also found that the negative impact on academic performance from having a deployed mother was higher than that experienced during a father’s deployment. Lyle
(2006) indicated that youth from single parent households are also at higher risk for decreases in academic performance.

Additionally, boys have been shown to be at higher risk for difficulties (Cozza et al., 2005). Boys may exhibit sadness, conflict with peers and siblings, and behavior issues during a father’s deployment (Applewhite & Mays, 1996). An examination of clinical records of boys who had fathers deployed in the Army revealed they felt an increase in rage, guilt, and separation anxiety. In some studies, boys have also been found to have lower test scores than girls during their parent’s absence (Phelps et al., 2010). However, it is important to note that in Phelps et al.’s (2010) own study, this was not the case and in fact, they found girls to have lower test scores than boys.

A study of military youth who had mothers deployed in the Navy, showed children to have increased internalizing behaviors of clinical significance (Lincoln et al., 2008). Deployment of mothers has also been shown to be correlated with an increased divorce rate post-deployment (Phelps et al., 2010), which puts youth at further at risk. Additionally, younger children tend to fair less well than older children during the absence of a parent (Lyle, 2006). Yet, teens are also of concern, since they are already experiencing several stressors that occur during adolescence; such as puberty, changes in relationships with parents, development of peer relationships, and rising academic demands (Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010). Youth may be more irritable and impulsive than usual with difficulty sleeping and increased emotional outbursts (Huebner et al., 2007). Research shows that youth may also experience nightmares as a result of parental separation during deployment (Applewhite & Mays, 1996), as the experience can be traumatic.
Parental Risk Factors and Impacts

Extended and Multiple Deployments

The impact of deployment on parents is also a concern for school counselors, since parental stress and maladjustment are indicators of child adjustment (Lester et al., 2012). SteelFisher et al. (2008) indicate that deployments have been found to cause stress in spouses and may result in the feeling of being unable to keep up with daily activities. According to Lester et al. (2012), the stress levels of non-deployed spouses are positively correlated with the number of months that the soldier is deployed. Families are often unsure of when their deployed soldier will return home. Additionally, the heightened media exposure during current wars adds to the stress that families are already experiencing (SteelFisher et al., 2008).

Mental Health and Environmental Issues

SteelFisher et al. (2008) found that deployment extensions exacerbated mental health issues, marital discord, and difficulties in daily life tasks. A survey of at home spouses during Operation Desert Storm showed that greater than 70% had symptoms of anxiety and depression during the deployment cycle (Warner, Appenzeller, Warner, & Grieger, 2009). In a study by SteelFisher et al. (2008), 20% of Army wives reported a decrease in health, 10% reported a decrease in marital satisfaction, and 50% reported feeling anxious or depressed. The authors also indicated that younger, unemployed, pregnant, and non-native wives tended to have the most difficulty coping with deployment. Those who had husbands or partners that were lower ranking, had lower socioeconomic status, or had more than one child were also at risk for higher levels of stress.

Additionally, many soldiers who are exposed to combat and traumatic experiences, show an increased risk of developing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and
substance abuse disorders. The percentage of soldiers with PTSD and depression after deployment ranges from 10-20% (Warner et al., 2009). Soldiers may try to cope by using substances, which can trigger more symptoms and problems. A returning parent who is suffering from PTSD may also isolate themselves and become emotionally detached from family members (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid & Weiss, 2008). Adding to the problem, traumatic brain injury and loss of limbs are more prevalent conditions as a result of the type of combat experienced today. These potential mental and physical changes in one’s parents have an effect on children and adolescents as well as the marital relationship.

**The Unique Challenges of Military Families**

**The Experience of Ambiguous Loss**

In a survey of military adolescents, many were experiencing ambiguous loss, which is thought to contribute negatively to one’s well-being (Lincoln et al., 2008). Ambiguous loss is felt when youth are uncertain or unclear about their own or their loved one’s role in the family, circumstances, or future. Deployment brings uncertainty with regard to numerous factors. Deployment and return dates may change unexpectedly, the location or safety of the soldier may be unknown at different times, and expectations for when the deployed parent is away and back home are often unclear. Houston et al. (2009) found that several youth worried about the safety of their family and of their soldier parent during deployment. Also, when parents are either emotionally unavailable to their children or physically absent, a loss is experienced (Huebner et al., 2007). Even the duration of this loss is another point of ambiguity. Also, the authors stated that ambiguity coupled with loss interferes with coping abilities and the grieving process. Youth are unable to control the situation and this adds to distress. Additionally, the roles of family members fluctuate and may be unclear. Sometimes children and adolescents feel like they are
expected to fill in for the absent parent. In this way, they are acting like adults, which may add additional stress and pressure to their lives. Activities in which they once participated may become a thing of the past due to lack of transportation or funds, further contributing to their sense of loss.

**New School Transitions**

Military youth relocate frequently and move to new homes approximately nine times throughout their childhood (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Lincoln et al. (2008) stated that, on average, relocations occur once every two to three years. Providing youth with support during these transitions is crucial as these disruptions can create many new challenges for youth, including difficulties making friends and achieving success in school. Many parents indicated the desire for more teacher training, so that educators would know how to connect with and best assist military students (Bradshaw et al., 2010). In a qualitative study by Bradshaw et al. (2010), adolescents were found to have difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships, acclimating to the structure, policies, and procedures of their new schools, progressing and succeeding academically, and participating in extracurricular activities. Thus, relocating was found to be anxiety and anger provoking.

**Relationship difficulties.** According to Bradshaw et al. (2010), students who moved frequently, more than once per year, were more likely to eventually refrain from even trying to form friendships, since they expected to leave again anyway. Youth also noted that they felt friends would distance themselves from them prior to their move, further complicating relationships. Adolescents are already concerned with fitting in. Having to be the new kid repeatedly makes it difficult to become accepted by other students, especially if they move after the school year is in progress. When living in military communities, adolescents may also
experience additional loss when friends leave due to relocation themselves. These frequent disruptions in relationships may cause long-term relationship issues, such as a fear of commitment. One military father reported that his repeated moves as a child caused long-lasting relationship difficulties throughout his adulthood.

**Acclimation and academic progress.** Upon entering a new school environment, adolescents complain that they are often expected to assimilate to their new environment without being recognized as unique individuals. Support during this adjustment period is sometimes lacking and students are unaware of how to navigate the school and of behavioral and academic expectations. Bradshaw et al. (2010) emphasize how students may have gaps in their learning or may need to repeat similar academic tasks over and over again to meet individual state requirements. This can be frustrating to parents and adolescents and may interfere with graduation. It can be especially disconcerting for parents of adolescents with learning disabilities. This is because services may not be provided initially as each state or school district tends to want to do their own special education testing upon relocation.

**Extracurricular activities.** Participation in extracurricular activities is also impacted. Bradshaw et al. (2010) stated that it is difficult for adolescents to enter into organized teams or groups. Coaches are sometimes reluctant to let military youth on teams due to the fear that they will move. Also, due to timelines for trying out for and entering into competitive sports and teams, many military adolescents are not allowed acceptance due to the simple fact that they have missed those deadlines. Unfortunately, this loss of opportunity may prevent talented students from gaining scholarships or from achieving high status in any activities.
Death of a Deployed Family Member

If the worst happens and the deployed parent is killed, students will need time to grieve. The grief process is different in children than it is in adults, and one’s interpretation of a parent’s death is thought to change as the child continues through various developmental stages (DOD, 2010). Although children and adolescents concepts of death vary depending on their religious beliefs, cultural background, and developmental level, they all have common reactions to grief (Petty, 2009). These include physical and behavioral symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, “lack of concentration, clingingness, excessive crying, irritability, and regression” (Petty, p. 161). The DOD (2010) provides examples of typical reactions based on one’s developmental level. Infants and toddlers may speak less often. Preschoolers may show difficulties in eating, sleeping, and elimination behaviors and display strong emotional reactions that are sporadic rather than persistent. Children of school-age may act older than they are, isolate themselves, and develop phobias or imagined illness. Adolescents demonstrate a range of symptoms including mood swings, physical maladies, and conduct issues. Girls may engage in sexual activities with others, while boys act out through delinquent actions. The lifestyle of military youth may also interfere with their acceptance of a deployed parent’s death. This is because many have become accustomed to living without the parent while he or she has been away completing one or more tours of duty. If children and adolescents do not successfully grieve the loss of their parent, they may become depressed or have trouble forming close relationships in the future. Additionally, those who experience the death of a parent through accidents or suicide have been shown to have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse in addition to experiencing symptoms for a longer-term.
The DOD (2010) indicated that children of younger parents who have limited coping skills and mental health issues are at higher risk for maladjustment. Military families that live in civilian communities may feel misunderstood and isolated. Therefore, these families tend to be at increased risk as well. Research has shown that open communication between surviving parents and their children, in addition to maintaining consistent and positive parenting techniques, helps to mitigate symptoms of anxiety and depression in youth after a loss. Children and adolescents have been shown to achieve positive personal growth after a traumatic event by connecting with others and being able to utilize adaptive coping skills. Therefore, it is important for school counselors to reach out to grieving parents to provide information about support services that are available in the community. Providing support and opportunities to communicate with others who are or have experienced a similar loss is likely to be helpful.

Stages of Deployment, Associated Stressors, and Positive Impacts

Sheppard, Malatras, and Israel (2010) describe a conceptual model of the deployment process, originally presented by Pincus, House, Christenson, and Adler (2001), that includes the following five phases: (a) pre-deployment, (b) deployment, (c) sustainment, (d) redeployment, and (e) post-deployment. Each stage presents a unique set of stressors and an opportunity for counselors to assist families in the development of coping skills. Again, military families may need support through all stages of deployment, and it is helpful to educate them about the process and the common challenges that accompany each stage (Gewirtz et al., 2011). This approach is beneficial, because it helps to normalize their experience and to let them know what difficulties often appear in a particular stage (DeVoe & Ross, 2012).
Pre-deployment

According to Sheppard et al. (2010), the pre-deployment phase is defined as the time between notification of deployment and departure. This period is often highly stressful and threatens the family’s sense of security (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). DeVoe and Ross (2012) indicate that deploying parents may not know how or when to tell their spouse and children about their future deployment. It is also often difficult to determine how and when to say goodbye. Developmentally appropriate goodbyes are recommended and can be discussed with the parents. Parents may also need to be supported with regard to concerns about their spouse’s safety during deployment, having to manage a household independently, and how to parent while their spouse is away. Families may experience tension from the deploying soldiers’ training schedules limiting time available to spend with spouses and children prior to departure. Pre-deployment is also a time when families respond with a wide array of feelings and emotional reactions that can lead to conflict, avoidance, or withdrawal. Emotions commonly experienced during the grieving process such as anger, sadness, and denial are typical of this phase (Riggs & Riggs, 2011).

Deployment

Deployment is considered the month following departure. The deployment stage is characterized by the families’ adjustment to the absence of the deployed parent and stresses that involve creating and adapting to new roles and routines (Sheppard et al., 2010). This is also the phase where the family finds ways to connect and stay in contact with the deployed service member. According to DeVoe and Ross (2012), the remaining parent may initially feel a sense of relief and then guilt after departure. Riggs and Riggs (2011) indicate that family members may feel numb at first and then feel abandoned and resentful. During deployment and sustainment, changes in children and adolescents emotions, behavior, and appetite are common
Youth tend to act-out, regress, or become fearful. During this time, children tend to express their fears and concerns and may experience separation anxiety (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Individuals in the family may also begin to have sleep disturbance issues. Riggs & Riggs indicate that the security of the bond between youth and the remaining parent and how the remaining parent copes with the separation will influence the emotional reactions of the children.

**Sustainment**

Sustainment continues for the duration of the deployment until one month prior to the service member’s return home (Sheppard et al., 2010). Sustainment is a time where remaining spouses may become physically and mentally depleted due to the amount of energy required to individually maintain the household and provide care for dependents (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). This often leads to a decrease in efforts to lead a healthy lifestyle and self-care is often neglected, which only exacerbates the situation. Additionally, continued feelings of distress over the safety and well-being of their deployed loved one may decrease their ability to sleep and desire to eat. Changes in child and adolescent routines, potentially compounded by the parent’s compromised ability to cope, may lead to the testing of limits and behavioral, social, emotional, and academic problems in military youth.

**Redeployment**

Redeployment represents the month leading up to the return home. DeVoe and Ross (2012) indicate this phase is filled with anticipation as the family looks forward to the deployed soldier’s return, yet they may also be concerned about the adjustment of the soldier back into the family and the change in family member’s roles. Children and adolescents may experience anxiety as they do not know what to expect (Petty, 2009). Additionally, frustration may occur if
the return date home is postponed and the family must come to terms with a longer than expected deployment.

**Post-deployment**

Post-deployment includes the three to six month time span after the service member has returned home. Although this phase is often initially filled with joy, it also tends to come with many challenges. During this time, the returning service member must rapidly adjust to being in a non-combat zone and to family life, which may or may not resemble the typical life that he or she was a part of before deployment (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Spouses may be reluctant to give up control over newly acquired responsibilities and parenting roles must be renegotiated. This can lead to conflict as the returning service member may want to take over or change routines that have been established, or in some cases, not participate at all. Children and adolescents may be resistant to changes in new routines and may not warmly receive their returning parent, which can lead to feelings of rejection and uselessness in the returning soldier. Sometimes the returning parent may be emotionally detached and suffering from mental health conditions such as PTSD and depression or physical injuries such as traumatic brain injury or loss of limbs. In these cases, the whole family must learn how to adjust to the changes in the returning service member and often to a new pattern and pace of life.

**Positive Impacts of the Deployment Cycle**

Although the key stressors and emotional reactions are often focused upon, many military families are also strong and resilient during the deployment cycle (Park, 2011). Throughout the deployment stages, remaining parents may experience increased feelings of confidence and competence as they are able to independently manage their households and additional family responsibilities (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). From an Adlerian viewpoint, youth may also feel more
competence and family connection due to their increased contributions at home. Additionally, Park indicated that children and adolescents may feel a sense of pride about their deployed family member’s service and sacrifice.

Those families living in military communities, such as military bases, have a supportive network and sense of belonging and community that can be buffering against the negative effects of deployment (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Bradshaw et al. (2010) found that students who went to schools on a military base reported less stress than those who lived off base. Findings from interviews with military children, conducted by Houston et al. (2009), supported the perceived benefit of connecting with peers from military families. Youth were able to relate to and communicate with others who had endured similar life experiences, which likely decreased their sense of isolation.

Military youth have also been found to exhibit an “appreciation for diversity and empathy for other students” (Bradshaw et al., 2010, p. 102). Relocations can provide opportunities for experiencing and learning about new people, places, and cultures (Park, 2011). According to Bradshaw et al. (2010), educators often comment that military youth seem more mature than their peers and have more adaptive and flexible natures. These characteristics are thought to be beneficial for those who are planning on college, because military youth tend to be more self-reliant and better able to adjust to changing environments than their non-military counterparts.

**School Counseling Approaches to Working with Military Families**

Military families’ experiences with challenges during the deployment process provide school counselors with a critical opportunity to deliver prevention and intervention efforts aimed at ensuring the well being of military children and adolescents. When working with students and their families, it is important to remember that family counseling tends to be preferred over
individual interventions geared toward service members and their partners due to the negative perception toward seeking help (Gewirtz, Erbes, Polusny, & Forgatch, 2011). Therefore, school-based services could lessen the focus on any one individual and be less threatening to families. Gewirtz et al. (2011) emphasize that consideration and sensitivity to the stigma of seeking assistance for mental health conditions is critical, as mental health diagnoses may negatively affect the service member’s military career. Fortunately, school counselors are in a unique position to provide assistance without being in a position to diagnosis. A school counselor can provide assistance in a school-wide and largely preventative way that minimizes a family’s association with existing stigmas and thereby increases their access to support.

Several models for working with service families are available. Park (2011) suggests that a strengths-based comprehensive and preventive approach, including efforts aimed at the greater community, may act to reduce the stigma that military families often feel with regards to receiving mental health services. Phelps et al. (2010) further recommend a “proactive approach incorporating user-friendly outreach support services that include collaboration between local agencies, conducting needs assessments, implementing community awareness programs, and promoting and implementing services in a non-threatening way” (p. 49). It is helpful for these school-based services to focus on primary care-givers as well as the children and adolescents within the family. Support for military families is recommended from the time of deployment notification to six months post-deployment (Harrison & Vannest, 2008).

Parents are the main influence on the resiliency of their children (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). Prevention strategies that target the primary care giver’s ability to cope during deployment are likely to benefit children and adolescents in the home, since the level of stability and positive adjustment of the family is a key contributor to academic, social, and
emotional functioning of youth when a family member is deployed (Gewirtz et al., 2011).

Additionally, families that are well prepared for the deployment process and have a supportive community and social network are better at adapting and coping while their loved one is away (Park, 2011). Lacking or minimal social support, in addition to social withdrawal, have been demonstrated to negatively impact the mental and physical health of individuals (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010).

**Supporting Children and Adolescents in School Settings**

Children and adolescents of military families are often overlooked in school settings and educators often do not know about the impact of deployment on these youth. This is of concern since deployment may negatively impact their academic, social, and emotional success. If military students’ needs are ignored, they may be referred for special services that are actually targeting temporary issues that are due to the deployment process (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). It is, therefore, important to point out that the costly process of special education testing and funding could be prevented in these cases, as special education services may not be needed. The school however, is in a position to be able to provide support through family assistance, teacher education, individual and group counseling services for students, and through the curriculum itself. These prevention and intervention strategies can be much more cost effective than funding special education services that are unnecessary.

**Adlerian Approach**

An Adlerian approach suggests supporting students in a collaborative way that highlights students’ strengths. Students are viewed as competent, capable, courageous individuals that are able to overcome obstacles (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). According to Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2008), the psychologist Alfred Adler viewed individuals as whole beings. His concept of
holism emphasizes the importance of understanding people within their social contexts. Therefore, gathering information from youth and their families can help create this understanding. The construction and interpretation of a genogram is an Adlerian technique that can be used to help identify students’ perceptions of family members, interactions, and strengths. Students’ strengths can be built upon and applied within the school setting to promote social interest and a sense of community. Additionally, Ziomek-Daigle et al. state that teachers and counselors can work with youth to establish a sense of belonging and connection through empathic, caring, and encouraging interaction. Allen and Staley (2007) suggest being honest, validating feelings, actively listening to students’ concerns, admitting when you do not know, encouraging sharing, and allowing opportunity for creative activities. Adler also believed that individuals attain well being by being balanced in the three tasks of life (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). For youth, these tasks include the areas of family, work or school, and social relationships. By analyzing children and adolescents’ satisfaction with each task of life, counselors can identify areas of intervention aimed at creating balance.

**Promoting Resiliency**

**Creating meaning.** In the book *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, a resiliency approach is presented to help military youth and their families cope with the loss they feel during the deployment cycle (Huebner et al., 2007). Resiliency approaches complement Adlerian approaches well as they both focus upon one’s strengths. With a resiliency approach, it is important for children and adolescents to make meaning of their situation, because individuals’ perceptions of their life circumstances impact how they cope. Houston et al. (2009) also found that, for children, meaning making was important to healthy adjustment during deployment. The Individual Psychology of Adler also supports meaning...
making. Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2008) explain that Adler’s concept of phenomenology involves the idea that individuals all have unique perceptions of their worlds. In order to understand individuals, one has to understand their perceptions. The authors suggest that once students’ perceptions are known, counselors are better prepared to develop strategies that will be encouraging to students as individuals. For example, school counselors could consult with teachers about incorporating material into content lessons that is of interest to military students or that relates to their career goals. One way counselors can facilitate meaning making with youth is to provide a time and place for them to talk with their peers about their experience with deployment. Huebner et al. (2007) suggest that topics for discussion could involve a description of their deployed family members, their roles, and their interpretation of the community’s view of their military parents’ work. These conversations help to illuminate negative perceptions and counselors can work with students to reframe these views.

**Identifying and building upon strengths.** To assist students in dealing with boundary ambiguity, the uncertainty they feel in their roles, responsibilities, and identity during deployment, counselors can help youth increase their sense of mastery and contribution (Huebner et al., 2007). This could be done by discussing areas and incidents where students have experienced success and by identifying their strengths. If students have particular interests, Huebner et al. (2007) suggest that opportunities for development of skills in these areas can help youth to gain a sense of mastery. For example, providing finance, cooking, sewing, home maintenance, yard work, gardening, or child care classes could help students contribute successfully to their families while the deployed soldier is away. Huebner et al. also suggest clearly reviewing the expectations and durations for children’s and adolescents’ new roles, so that there is a less ambiguity and students can have a sense of control over their situation.
Normalizing through psychoeducation. Lastly, youth benefit from being provided psychoeducation regarding mental health issues that can stem from the deployment experience. Huebner et al. (2007) encourage the development of a wellness plan that will address how children and adolescents will cope with their anger and stress. It is beneficial to also encourage parents to engage in healthy behaviors; so that youth have positive role models within the home. Adolescents often need help in “externalizing the situation and normalizing their feelings” (Huebner et al., 2007, p.121). They may often experience conflicting feelings and need reassurance that is okay to feel that way. Huebner et al. indicate that many youth also need to find constructive ways of expressing themselves and their emotions. Developing connections with others is important. All too often, children and adolescents withdraw as their primary coping mechanism when they lose a parent to deployment. This is maladaptive and establishing connections with other youth and adults is important. Additionally, it is vital for counselors to provide support networks for students throughout the deployment phases and not just during times of crisis.

Support via the ASCA Model

Responsive services. Through the responsive services component of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model, school counselors may provide support to students in order to address urgent needs and concerns (ASCA, 2005). Individual and group counseling efforts aimed at developing skill in identifying and expressing emotions are helpful, since military kids often have difficulty in this area throughout the deployment process (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). Yet, they experience an extensive variety of feelings including, anger, fear, sadness, depression, frustration, loss of control, guilt, and grief (Petty, 2009; Harrison & Vannest, 2008). To assist in the identification and expression of feelings, individual counseling
interventions could be established through the use of direct instruction, role plays, and modeling. Using posters or picture cards that display faces with different emotions can be effective in identifying changing emotions throughout the day (Petty, 2009). Students could carry a small version of the poster in their notebook or folder during the school day or, as Petty (2009) suggests, have a magnetic version that they keep somewhere at home. Youth can be taught how to use a “feeling thermometer” where different colors indicate various levels of distress (Lester et al., 2011). The authors also suggest that the thermometer be used to assess their stress at any given time and help to identify and reflect upon emotional triggers. Individual and group counseling sessions can further help by building positive and effective coping skills in the areas of communication, anger management, stress reduction, and relaxation (Harrison & Vannest, 2008).

In the resource, Dealing With Deployment, Aydlett (2006) presents a variety of small group counseling lessons for working with military children and adolescents. Aydlett proposes a series of eight lessons that include honoring deployed family members, learning about the country and culture where their loved one is stationed, developing patriotism, sharing feelings, identifying one’s support system, exploring resiliency by creating and discussing a timeline of past and future events, and celebrating progress. Aydlett recommends using a pre and post-test to measure the effectiveness of the group counseling intervention, since research in this area is limited. Examples are included in the resource guide along with sample permission and referral letters that can be sent to parents, teachers, and administrators.

Providing responsive services is also critical upon the death of a parent. The DOD (2010) indicates that there appears to be a brief window of opportunity for intervention that may attenuate or stop the development of negative outcomes and youth typically need support for an
extended period of time. Helpful interventions include the building of self-esteem and family cohesiveness, developing social supports, and learning healthy coping skills. Petty (2009) also offers several suggestions for helping students through the grief process. She states that counselors should refrain from describing their own religious views or beliefs regarding life after death as it may conflict with the personal views of the student. Petty recommends being honest with youth and validating instead of dismissing their feelings. Allow students to talk openly and share stories of the deceased. It is also helpful for adults to share positive memories. Petty suggests that parents share facts about how the deployed soldier died, encourage questions, allow children to contribute to the planning of a funeral or memorial, and let them know that they are not responsible for the death in any way. Celebrating birthdays or Memorial Day may be a special way for families to honor the deceased as well. Grieving usually lasts for a year after the death of a parent. If grief reactions persist longer than one year, youth may be at risk for a variety of mental health conditions requiring clinical intervention.

School guidance curriculum. Supporting students via the curriculum is a unique and effective way to contribute to the academic, social, and emotional well-being of military youth. Harrison and Vannest (2008) indicated that maintaining communication with the deployed service member is important. They provide several examples of how to establish communication skills by incorporating military life into the curriculum. By integrating communication skills, such as how to write letters and e-mails into English or technology classes, students are better able to maintain connection with their loved ones. In technology classes, learning how to use Skype or other Web based communications software would be helpful. Operation: Military Kids has mobile technology labs that may be available for use, depending on the location of one’s school (Petty, 2009). These labs are equipped with “laptops, digital cameras and video
cameras, printers, scanners, laminators, and software for children to use in making connections” (Petty, 2009, p.155). According to Harrison and Vannest, another idea is to use stories, poems, or current events that focus upon soldiers. In math class, students could develop finance skills, like budgeting or balancing a check book. Additionally, they could use math to determine the number of days until their deployed family member returns home. In Social Studies or Geography, students can locate the country where the deployed soldier is stationed and learn about the culture there. Harrison and Vannest also indicate that art class provides numerous options for expression, such as painting, drawing, sculpting, photography, collage, and scrapbooking. Digital photography skills can also help students communicate and share experiences with their deployed family member via the Internet.

**Individual student planning.** Individual student planning involves school counselors assisting students in setting and achieving academic, career, and personal goals (ASCA, 2005). This component of the ASCA model is well aligned to helping students who have relocated, since they are likely to need help with understanding transfer of credits and development of their academic plans. During new school transitions, Bradshaw et al. (2010) recommend strategies aimed at lessening the stress and anxiety that many students feel. The results of their study also showed that many parents desired increased communication with the school and particularly communication between new and old schools with regard to records transfers. They also wanted more flexibility when it came to accommodating their students’ needs with regard to graduation requirements. In fact, Allen and Staley (2007) indicate support for this request by stating that it is important to be consistent with expectations and consequences, yet, be flexible in academic requirements when working with military youth.
**System support.** School counselors work as collaborators with administrators and other educational professionals to support and advocate for students’ needs (ASCA, 2005). Through system support, such as in-service training for teachers and consultation, they are able to act as a bridge between parents and the school. Many needs and frustrations are often expressed by parents and students who have endured relocation. For example, Allen and Staley (2007) found that parents advocated for waivers on repeats of special education testing, as it caused gaps in supportive services. Due to learning gaps, tutoring was additionally desired by parents as a way to get their students caught up in the curriculum. Many students wanted a map or layout of the school sent to them, so that they could familiarize themselves with the school in order to feel more comfortable upon arrival. Bradshaw et al. (2010) suggest pairing current students with new students in a peer buddy system. The peer buddy would bring them to their classes and introduce them to others. Participation in extracurricular activities, although often difficult for military youth who relocate frequently, is also suggested. Engaging in extracurricular activities is a great way to connect, build sense of community, and learn about oneself and others. Counselors could help to generate a list of all possible activities, sports, and clubs for new students. This would introduce them to all potential opportunities and may get students to try something new.

**Building a Sense of Community**

According to Adler, all humans find ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment in social connection (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). Bradshaw et al. (2010) found that students’ primary concerns involved figuring out where they belonged in school and who they belong with. Harrison and Vannest (2008) recommend creating connections with other military youth by organizing activities where children and adolescents from different schools can come together. This would provide an opportunity to decrease feelings of isolation that are common to this
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population. If there are multiple students in the same school that have deployed family members, a counseling group consisting of these students could also create a safe place for sharing one’s experiences, exploring feelings, and developing coping skills. Additional ways to connect students with peers, including non-military youth, include organizing homework helpers or peer study groups (Harrison & Vannest). With younger students, facilitating lunch time friendship groups can be a fun way to allow students to connect, share feelings, and play.

Phelps et al. (2010) recommend initiating a mentorship program for students of low socioeconomic status. The authors suggest having mentors who had attended college and have similar cultural backgrounds pair up with students in order to help reduce the achievement gap. Since parents of low-income students have been shown to be less involved in their children’s education, mentors could help to provide students with a vision for their future. Adler’s concept of teleology states that all individuals are goal-oriented and that one’s behavior is aligned with achieving those goals (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). Creating a sense of purpose, by identifying a career goal, can be highly motivating to students and engages them in their learning by showing how it connects to their future success (Mendler, 2000).

Supporting Parents through School Counseling Programs

Parental Impact and Recommended Types of Support

The ability of the at home parent to cope and adjust to deployment is a key factor in the success of children and adolescents during deployment (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). A military youth’s main daily concern is not about the deployed parent, but about the well being of the at home parent (Fritz, 2011). In fact, research indicates that there were no negative behavioral and academic impacts of significance on those youth whose main care giver was positively adjusted (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). Allen and Stanley (2007) recommend reminding at home parents
of their impact on their children; which can help emphasize the importance of their role and of maintaining their physical and mental health. Harrison and Vannest (2008) also indicate that training in coping skills for parents that is offered by the military is often limited in scope. Therefore, it is common for the at home parent to revert to the use of coercive discipline or to withdraw from their children all together. Gewirtz et al. (2011) recommend two types of support that are useful to military families. First, helping with parenting throughout the deployment cycle and within its context is beneficial as it contributes to the positive adjustment of children and adolescents. Second, teaching parents how to effectively control their emotions and to build upon their parenting strengths has also been shown to assist military families.

**Initial Parent Outreach and Prevention efforts**

Initially, it may be helpful for school counselors to invite individual military families to the school to connect them with, to explain how the school can support them, and to and create an awareness of community resources. Petty (2009) recommends giving families pamphlets on support groups in the community and providing them with information about online resources such as www.militaryonesource.com and www.militarychild.org. Phelps et al. (2010) encourage schools to invite community resource professionals to the school to provide information to families about their services and to offer small workshop sessions during an open house night at the school. Sessions could include topics of significance such as budgeting, parenting, and self-care. Phelps et al. also recommend having support groups run their sessions at the school to promote collaboration between school and community, help build sense of community, and also provide a non-threatening environment for parents who may be resistant to seeking services in a clinical setting. Additionally, Petty suggests sending a letter home during the pre-deployment period to guide parents in preparing their children for the soldier’s absence.
Fritz (2011) wrote *When a Child’s Military Parent is Deploying*, which is a useful reference that could be sent to parents. It contains ten tips for adjusting to deployment and suggests setting up a time to talk with the family about one’s upcoming deployment and how family members left at home will adjust to the soldier’s absence. According to Fritz, it is beneficial to figure out what responsibilities children and adolescents are willing to take on as a way of honoring the absent parent and contributing to the family. This decreases resentment that military youth may feel due to added duties at home. Expectations for communication should be talked about and a deployment calendar created that includes departure and return dates in addition to key holidays and family events. Fritz indicates that this can help children and adolescents compartmentalize and make sense of the amount of time that the soldier will be gone. Being honest and open when sharing information during the deployment cycle is essential as youth typically imagine the worst case scenario when communication is withheld. Fritz also encourages maintaining family routines, being consistent with discipline, continuing existing family traditions, and communicating regularly with children and adolescents schools. Lastly, it is emphasized that parents remaining at home practice self-care as a way to remain resilient through the length of the deployment.

**Phase-Specific Deployment Supports for Parents**

**Pre-deployment support.** Within the context of the deployment cycle, Petty (2009) provides several suggestions on how to support military families during each phase. During the pre-deployment period, contacting the family and having a discussion about how and how often they would like the school to communicate with them is helpful. Teachers and counselors are encouraged to maintain consistency in routines at school and to be observant and alert to any indications of stress or emotional instability. It is also important to have referral resources
identified and handy in case more support is necessary. Counselors can become familiar with students’ family traditions and try to acknowledge them in some way throughout the school year. For elementary students, having pictures, notes or letters from the deployed family member to place in the students desk or supply bin can allow the student an emotional boost when needed. Petty also recommends play as often as possible as a form of expression.

Petty (2009) provides a checklist for students to use in order to prepare for their parents upcoming departure. The checklist includes items that remind children and adolescents of what to do before the parent leaves and of how to stay in touch once the parent has deployed. Pre-deployment suggestions include verbally expressing love for the parent, taking a photo of the child and the parent together, purchasing a special gift that could be sent with the deploying soldier, and spending special time together before the parent leaves. Other tips include suggesting that deploying family members create a video tape or audio recording of themselves reading their children’s favorite stories or books or even singing favorite songs or bedtime lullabies (Allen & Staley, 2007). “The United Through Reading program of the Family Literacy Foundation can assist deployed service members in making a video of themselves reading a story (go to www.read2kids.org/united.htm for more information)” (Allen & Staley, 2007, p. 3).

**Deployment and sustainment supports.** During deployment and sustainment, the absence of a deployed parent from athletic events, holidays, birthdays, and other important parts of everyday life is strongly recognized by military youth (Petty, 2009). Communication technologies can help deployed family members share in these experiences. Yet, children and adolescents need their feelings to be affirmed regularly and the use of empathy is beneficial in making students feel validated and heard. Petty suggests encouraging at home parents to make the deployed parent’s favorite recipes while away.
When a soldier’s deployment is unexpectedly extended, coping skills need to be supported as this may trigger negative emotions. With younger children, puppets could be used to act out the story of deployment (Petty, 2009). The author suggests giving out hero packs to military youth who are heroes in and of themselves. Hero packs are available from Operation: Military Kids. Counselors can contact them directly or go online at www.operationmilitarykids.org. Older students can be invited to talk with younger students about their experiences with deployment. Connecting with students in this way, can help create a sense of community and give hope to younger students. Petty (2009) recommends Speak Out for Military Kids (SOMK), which is an organization that “raises community awareness about deployment and the issues that families face while separated from loved ones” (Petty, 2009, p. 155).

**Re-deployment and post-deployment supports.** During deployment and sustainment, it is important to re-establish connection with the family (Petty, 2009). In order to build a sense of connectedness, photo albums of the military family member can be shared prior to his or her return. After reuniting, Petty (2009) suggests special outings with the returning parent as they can also help to reestablish any lost connection. Petty indicates that missed holidays can also be celebrated when the soldier has returned home. Additionally, parents can be provided with information on child development and behavior change, so they know how to appropriately respond to their children during this stressful time.

**Promoting Positive Parenting**

**Developing security.** According to Gewirtz et al. (2011), when youth are faced with difficult times, positive parenting strategies work to protect them and decrease their risk of maladjustment. Gewirtz et al. (2011) recommend discussing what parenting strategies are
already working and what is important to the family in order to begin formulating positive goals that will help with child adjustment. Although providing individual family therapy is outside of the school counselor’s role, several tips for military families have been proposed by Gewirtz et al. and could be presented to interested families through a military parent night at the school. Developing and offering an evening presentation or alternately a pamphlet of useful tips and tools, would allow for role appropriate support of students and their families. For example, presenting the at home parent with tips for developing and implementing consistent routines, rules, and rituals benefits youth by providing them with a sense of security and constancy during a time of ambiguity and change. Gewirtz et al. also recommended that any unnecessary transitions, such as changing schools or day care providers, are eliminated during this already stressful time. Having a “united parenting front” is also essential as it ensures needed consistency in a child’s life (Gewirtz et al., 2011, p. 61). In fact, families that maintain consistent routines, rituals, and quality time have been found to be more resilient (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010).

**Problem-solving.** Gewirtz et al. (2011) also suggest that it is important for families to have an effective method of problem solving. They propose tips such as the use of family meetings to discuss issues and identify family goals. Additionally, by talking as a family about problems, the family is able to create a shared narrative of the deployment experience which can help create a sense of unity. Lester et al. (2011) found that creating a child narrative map that is shared with parents, helps youth to clear up miscommunications, build communication and connection, and develop a common story. Creating a sense of meaning adds to one’s resiliency (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). The author indicates that resilience is fostered when families have shared values and beliefs that allow them to respond to adversity in a unified way.
Therefore, assisting families in identifying these values and beliefs is useful. Since children and adolescents often experience anxiety during the deployment cycle, Gewirtz et al. indicate that it is beneficial for counselors to discuss and role-play developmentally appropriate parent responses to children’s worries and questions.

**Behavior interventions.** It is important to note that stressed parents often resort to coercive parenting strategies; which negatively impact youth. Therefore, providing parents with examples of how to give clear and calm directives to their children helps to lessen any existing dependence on angry or avoidant reactions (Gewirtz et al., 2011). The authors propose giving parents scripts that they can follow and role-playing the use of specific directives. Introducing parents to the use of natural and logical consequences helps children and adolescents to accept responsibility for their actions and to learn social expectations (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). The Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) program is based on Adlerian views and may also be helpful. Working with parents, school counselors can additionally assist in setting limits which provide some freedom and choice. Having choice gives youth a sense of personal power, which is an important part of developing resilient children (Brendtro & Larson, 2006).

Contingency management is a strategy that can be taught to parents so that they can get their children and adolescents to do necessary chores and activities that they dislike or find challenging (Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice [CECP], 2001). Contingency management is a system where youth need to perform or complete an undesirable activity, such as cleaning one’s room, in order to gain access to a preferred activity. This technique works because it is a positive reward system; which has been shown to work better than punishment, and it is applicable to a variety of environments. It also has demonstrated effectiveness with child and adolescent populations. CECP (2001) recommends that the principle be explained to
clients with specifics about which behavior is expected and what the exact reward will be. It must be clear that the reward will not be given if the contingent behavior is not performed. To be most effective, rewards should be decided upon in collaboration with the child or adolescent and given immediately after the desired behavior is completed. If the desired behavior is too challenging to perform initially, the behavior can be broken down into smaller, more attainable tasks.

**Encouragement.** Encouragement is also critical to establishing a positive and caring environment and can help families break out of negative cycles of coercive interactions. It also helps youth identify their strengths (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). In Adlerian Psychology, encouragement, which fosters social interest, is recommended rather than praise (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). According to Adler, in order to encourage, one has to focus in on the child’s strengths. Encouragement focuses on “(a) actions rather than performance, (b) present rather than past or future, (c) behavior rather than person, (d) effort rather than outcome, (e) intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic, (f) what has been learned rather than lack of learning, and (g) more positive than negative” (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008, p. 456). Gewirtz et al. (2011) suggest encouraging a child or adolescent five times for every one negative interaction. An environment filled with encouragement can help restore harmony to military families that are under stress.

**Promoting Self-care to Help with Emotion Regulation**

Lastly, school counselors could present parents with information on relaxation techniques and self-care in order to assist them with the regulation of their emotions and stress reduction. This type of preventative service may help to reduce the reliance on negative relaxation techniques, such as substance use, that many families experience as a result of military deployment (Gewirtz et al., 2011). Progressive muscle relaxation and deep breathing are two
types of evidence-based treatments that are shown to be effective with individuals who experience anxiety (Jongsma, Peterson, & McInnis, 2006).

**Progressive muscle relaxation.** Progressive muscle relaxation exists in various forms, since it has been revised many times by different mental health professionals over the years (Field, 2009). With all forms, the counselor guides the individuals through a step by step process of focusing upon, tensing, and then relaxing different muscle groups throughout the body. The person is often seated in a chair with both feet on the floor and palms flat on one’s thighs or lying down. Individuals are told to clench a particular muscle group for ten seconds, such as the muscles of the face, while focusing on the tightness, and then to relax those muscles (Hilt, 2011). Awareness is brought to the difference in sensation between the tense and relaxed states. Individuals are verbally directed to focus on the relaxed feeling they experience after tensing and releasing each muscle group. The counselor leads them through contraction and relaxation of all the main muscle groups in the body and ends with emphasizing awareness of the relaxed state. Breathing slowly and deeply while engaging in the process is recommended.

**Deep breathing.** Deep breathing is a behavior that can also be taught to parents and their children. It is used to replace anxious bodily reactions with a state of calm (Hilt, 2011). The author indicates that this technique is often used in combination with progressive muscle relaxation. People can be trained in this skill by having them imagine that they have a tube connecting their mouth to their stomach where there is a balloon attached. Individuals lie down and monitor their breathing by placing a hand on their stomach. They try to push the imagined balloon out as far as possible while breathing in and then feel it deflate as they breathe out. Focus is placed on breathing slowly while counting to three, pausing, and then exhaling to a
count of six. Hilt suggests having individuals imagine a wave flowing back and forth. This technique, once mastered, can be used virtually anywhere to decrease anxiety.

**Conclusion**

Although many military youth have been found to be resilient during the deployment process, research has also shown deployment to have several potential negative impacts. Since the adjustment of the at home parent is the primary influence on the development of emotional, behavioral, and academic problems in children and adolescents, prevention and intervention efforts aimed at assisting the entire family are beneficial. School counselors are in a position to provide services that are less threatening to families than the seeking of community mental health resources. Promoting the positive adjustment of youth during the deployment cycle can be a cost effective way to avoid unnecessary special education services, while allowing students to reach their full potentials. Prevention and intervention services are recommended throughout all stages of the deployment process and within the context of the deployment cycle.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The available research on how to support military families in school settings is limited in scope. There is a need for more primary research on the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies to help military youth and their families. Research is also needed on the impacts of deployment-related parental absence on youth (DOD, 2010). There are a minimal number of studies available on the impact of having a deployed mother; which has become more common over the years. Some concern exists over the generalizability of the data as most studies have been done on children and adolescents who had fathers deployed in the military. Additionally, many of the research findings are based upon the families of active military soldiers with little data from National Guard member’s families. Future research efforts geared
toward the efficacy of strengths-based interventions and other intervention and prevention efforts would be beneficial to school systems. Schools often have limited staff, time, and funding. Therefore, promoting and utilizing effective programs is vital to gaining administrative support and to implementing strategies that will foster the positive well being of students.
References


