

Study focuses on military children

staff report

Wong, Gerras: Kids 11-17 cope better with multiple deployments when their parents' call to duty is valued

March 11, 2010 -- Despite the increased attention on the impact of repetitive deployments on Soldiers, there has been very little research examining the effects of multiple deployments on Army children.

Much research seeks to answer the question, are Army children stressed by deployments? Previous studies and thousands of Army households can confirm that deployments do cause stress in children.

In 2009, SSI research professor Dr. Leonard Wong and USAWC professor Dr. Stephen Gerras focused research to determine factors influence adolescent stress during a parent's deployment.

They reviewed online survey responses from a random sample of more than 2,000 Soldiers in FORSCOM. The Soldiers—36% of whom were deployed—were also given a link and password to forward to their spouses, so over 700 spouses completed an identical survey. And, they gave Soldiers links for their children 11 – 17 years, which netted 550 completed adolescent surveys. A second phase included 101 individual interviews with Army adolescents at eight Army installations. Interviews fleshed out trends that emerged in the quantitative surveys.

The interaction of the three subgroups in our survey -- Soldiers, spouses, and children – revealed insights from the most relevant sources. To know how many times a Soldier has been deployed, the best source of that information is the Soldier, not the child. To know how well a non-deployed spouse handles things when their Soldier is deployed, ask the spouse, not the Soldier. To know how adolescents feel—if they are nervous, if they have disturbing thoughts, if they worry about what will happen in the future—ask the children, not their parents.

The authors expected a cumulative effect of deployments – that each subsequent deployment would result in higher stress in children. That's what the Soldiers thought as well. But adolescents who had experienced two previous deployments actually reported lower average stress than those with only one deployment in their past. Adolescents reported even lower stress, on average, with three deployments.

"It appears children learn coping strategies and mature," said Wong.

The research revealed that the best predictors of stress experienced by an adolescent during a

deployment are –

- involvement in activities – specifically sports
- strength of the child's family
- the child's belief that the American public supports the war.

Participation in sports as a predictor of deployment stress was unremarkable and youth sports programs are relatively easy to create. The strength of the family as a mitigator of deployment stress was also expected, but building strong families is definitely a much longer term concern. But that the strength of a child's perception of public support for the war would be associated with their deployment stress was unexpected and is a much more complex issue, said Wong.

The researchers additionally examined strategies for dealing with the difficult role of as son or daughter of a Soldier during a long war. A surprising 56% of Army adolescents responded that they coped well or very well while a much lower 17% said they coped poorly or very poorly.

Today's Army adolescents realize that they too are inextricably linked to the war fight. If one out of every six Army adolescents reports doing poorly with repeated deployments, the situation can hardly be considered satisfactory. Yet, the findings illustrate an unanticipated and remarkable resiliency in most Army adolescents in dealing with lives marked by multiple deployments.

The research revealed that the best predictors of stress experienced by an adolescent in a life marked by multiple deployments are -- during multiple deployments are --

- the child's belief that their parent's call to duty is worth the sacrifice
- strong family
- keeping kids busy
- public opinion concerning the war.

Wong believes that maturity of today's Army adolescents is exemplified by the comments of a Sergeant Major's 16-year-old daughter who said, *"My daddy always being gone makes me stress out the most. He is in charge of a lot of Soldiers and he always has to do what they do. 'Set the example,' he says, 'Don't ask a Soldier to do something you can't or won't do.' I get scared that sometimes he will forget to be careful and he will get hurt. He has deployed so many times already, but he tells me to not worry. 'Somebody has to do the job and take care of the younger Soldiers.'*

"I just wish that sometimes he would forget about Soldiers and remember me and my sister, she countered. We need him too. I just wish the fighting would stop, then he would be able to stay home with us. I love my daddy to death, but he will never give up on taking care of his Soldiers."

The full study, *The Effects of Multiple Deployments on Army Adolescents*, is available at

www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil

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