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Evaluation of a Family-Centered Prevention Intervention for Military Children and Families Facing Wartime Deployment

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KEYWORDS: Resiliency, military families, deployment, psychological stress

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- The Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS) project is designed to help military families cope with deployment-related challenges by providing education and skills training. Prior to entry to FOCUS, military families in this study reported less healthy family functioning and elevated levels of distress.
- Participation in FOCUS resulted in significant improvements in emotional and behavioral adjustment for both parents and children in military families. Children's positive coping skills increased, and psychological distress was reduced for both service members and their spouses.
- FOCUS and other related programs face unique challenges in providing services for the military population. Military families may be unable to complete intervention programs due to work-related relocations, as was the case in this study. Additionally, more distressed parents may be in need of greater outreach and engagement, including processes to bridge services during relocations.

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ABSTRACT:

Objectives: We evaluated the Families OverComing Under Stress program, which provides resiliency training designed to enhance family psychological health in US military families affected by combat- and deployment-related stress.

Methods: We performed a secondary analysis of Families OverComing Under Stress program evaluation data that was collected between July 2008 and February 2010 at 11 military installations in the United States and Japan. We present data at baseline for 488 unique families (742 parents and 873 children) and pre–post outcomes for 331 families.

Results: Family members reported high levels of satisfaction with the program and positive impact on parent–child indicators. Psychological distress levels were elevated for service members, civilian parents, and children at program entry compared with community norms. Change scores showed significant improvements across all measures for service member and civilian parents and their children ($P < .001$).

Conclusions: Evaluation data provided preliminary support for a strength-based, trauma-informed military family prevention program to promote resiliency and mitigate the impact of wartime deployment stress.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

The FOCUS program is a strength-based resiliency program that promotes positive behavioral, and emotional development for military families and social development for their children. Results of this study demonstrate the importance of such programs in improving outcomes for military families, as participants in the FOCUS program were able to increase family functioning and decrease stress in both active-duty and non-active duty service members, their spouses, and their children. FOCUS participants were also able to develop coping skills in children and strengthen family resiliency to emotional and psychological distress. Through this program, families work together to communicate, share their perspectives and share their experiences during deployment, all of which help to foster family cohesion and support. Clinicians and community members interested in improving the well-being of military families should work to increase both availability and participation for these programs before, during and after deployment. Including all family members in the therapeutic process, and focusing on the challenges of managing combat-related stress, physical and psychological injuries prior to deployment, can greatly benefit military families and contribute to their well-being.

FOR POLICY

The results of this study demonstrate the importance of family-based resiliency programs for military service members and their families. Policy makers may wish to focus their efforts on promoting and supporting these programs, and working with the Department of Defense to ensure such programs are offered to service members in all branches of the military who are facing deployment. Military families can work to develop and strengthen their coping skills in preparation for deployment, which will allow for healthy family functioning both during deployment and upon their service member's return.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While in this study researchers noted growth in emotional, psychological, and social resiliency in military families and their children, future studies may benefit from the addition of a control group to compare outcomes among those enrolled in a family-based resiliency program with those who were not enrolled in such a program. Future research should examine the effects of the FOCUS program on military families in other branches, including the National Guard and Reservists. Researchers should also include participants from a variety of geographic areas and socioeconomic backgrounds in order to increase generalizability of the study results. In addition, a longitudinal study examining the effects of FOCUS for years after families complete the program could demonstrate the benefits of such a program over the long term. Lastly, future research should continue to focus on strength-based programs that include the entire family, like FOCUS, to compare the benefits of such programs with those of more traditional therapy or medical interventions.

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