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Fathering after Military Deployment: Parenting Challenges and Goals of Fathers of Young Children

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- As part of a larger study assessing the effectiveness of the [STRoNG](#) Military Families program, the authors interviewed fathers of young children after their return from deployment to a combat zone. Findings indicate that fathers share many goals and experience similar challenges when it comes to reintegrating into family and society.
- Fathers expressed a desire to learn and develop new parenting skills, receive support in expressing emotions and providing nurturing care to their young children, and learn how to manage their temper at high-stress moments with their children. Fathers also expressed a desire to connect with other military families and learn from each other's parenting experiences.
- Several challenges for returning fathers were identified: difficulty reconnecting with their child(ren) upon reunion, regret about missing an important period in their child's development, trouble adapting their expectations from military life to family life, and needing to re-learn how to co-parent in the context of deployment and reunification.
- Findings underscore the resilience and coping abilities of returning service members and their families. Acknowledging that both great happiness and great stress are associated with returning home, participants voiced a desire for additional support for themselves and family members during reintegration.
- Support may be particularly important for parents who have experienced trauma during deployment. While a child's unhappiness or misbehavior is difficult for all parents, trauma symptoms may compound the difficulty of tolerating a child's distress or demandingness.

ABSTRACT

“Although often eagerly anticipated, reunification after deployment poses challenges for families, including adjusting to the parent-soldier’s return, re-establishing roles and routines, and the potentially necessary accommodation to combat-related injuries or psychological effects. Fourteen male service members, previously deployed to a combat zone, parent to at least one child under seven years of age, were interviewed about their relationships with their young children. Principles of grounded theory guided data analysis to identify key themes related to parenting young children after deployment. Participants reported significant levels of parenting stress and identified specific challenges, including difficulty reconnecting with children, adapting expectations from military to family life, and coparenting. Fathers acknowledged regret about missing an important period in their child’s development and indicated a strong desire to improve their parenting skills. They described a need for support in expressing emotions, nurturing, and managing their tempers. Results affirm the need for support to military families during reintegration and demonstrate that military fathers are receptive to opportunities to engage in parenting interventions. Helping fathers understand their children’s behavior in the context of age-typical responses to separation and reunion may help them to renew parent-child relationships and reengage in optimal parenting of their young children”



IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Many fathers had difficulty adapting from highly structured military life to the less orderly life that often exists in a home with young children. Before their return, deployed fathers and the parent or other caregiver at home should develop a plan for reintegrating their veteran back into the family fold. If the deployed father will be resuming parenting together with a co-parent, the two should discuss how they plan to do this, including specific discussion of how the current needs of their young child(ren) may be different than the child(ren)'s needs before the father deployed. A new approach to parenting may be necessary for a child who has experienced significant growth and development over the period of deployment. Teachers, counselors, and social workers can support service members' return to parenting a young child by offering education about early development, emphasizing age-typical behaviors that may be challenging and developmentally appropriate discipline. Reestablishing family relationships is achieved through daily interactions when family members respond to each other's needs for support and connection, such as picking up the young child when she cries or playing together. Families should plan activities that foster opportunities for bonding one-on-one between young children and the returned parent, between parents, and for the whole family together. Veterans struggling with reintegrating should utilize VA services. The VA offers several services to address post-deployment reintegration, including individual and group counseling, family counseling, and educational programs focused on post-deployment stressors. Returning parents should connect with other veteran parents to discuss shared experiences, best parenting practices, and build strong local communities of resilient veteran parents.

FOR POLICY

The Department of Defense (DoD) might use the results of this study (and the larger evaluation of the STRoNG Military Families program) to inform efforts to support the reintegration of service members into their families. Programming that addresses reintegration challenges should include specific content regarding a return to parenting young children and return to co-parenting. The VA and DoD might work together to fill gaps in programming identified by veteran parents in this study. Participants recognized that family relationships are strained by deployments and were eager for support for the whole family through the extended period of reintegration as well as opportunities to connect with families in similar circumstances. Thus, policymakers might allocate additional funds to implement and support programs to help veterans reintegrate back into their families, build and maintain solid spousal and parent-child relationships, and engage in positive parenting that is responsive to children's developmental needs. Specific program components could include learning and developing parenting skills, teaching stress management for high pressure situations, emotional counseling, parent support groups, and activities to reconnect veterans with both children and the co-parent.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study demonstrates some of the challenges fathers with young children face upon returning home after a deployment, as well as their hopes for the future. A limitation of this study is that the sample was primarily white and exclusively male. Future research should examine the parenting challenges and goals of demographically diverse men and women veterans to learn whether needs for support vary. Fathers interviewed for this study were participants in the STRoNG program and may have particularly high levels of motivation to invest in parenting. In future studies, researchers should draw a random sample of veteran parents to reduce selection bias. Whereas the current study was limited to National Guard and Reserve service members, future research should sample veterans from all service branches and examine the specific challenges that parents from each branch might face after returning from a deployment or duty. This study focused specifically on the return to parenting young children (under the age of 7); future research should examine the parenting support needs of parents of older children, and parents returning to families with multiple children across the age spectrum. Half of the participants in the current study were unemployed, and future research should probe the impact of employment as a factor inhibiting or encouraging veteran parent reintegration following deployment.

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