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Substance Use Among Military-Connected Youth: The California Healthy Kids Survey

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PUBLICATION TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

KEYWORDS: Afghanistan and Iraq wars, deployment, military children, military youth, siblings, substance use

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Previous studies on deployment and family members have noted that military deployment can have negative psychological outcomes and behaviors on dependent children. However, much of the research on deployment and family members has not included siblings. This study focuses on the risks of substance use for dependent children and siblings of deployed service members.
- Regardless of the number of military deployments, youth with deployed family members reported higher rates of substance use. Youth with a sibling in the military used substances at higher rates.
- Substance use, excluding lifetime smoking, was found to be positively correlated with number of family member deployments. Recent drug use was highest among youth with a parent deployed.

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ABSTRACT:

“Background: Young people in military-connected families may be exposed to deleterious stressors, related to family member deployment, that have been associated with externalizing behaviors such as substance use. Substance use predisposes youth to myriad health and social problems across the life span.

Purpose: This study examined the prevalence and correlates of lifetime and recent substance use in a normative sample of youth who were either connected or not connected to the military.

Methods: Data are from a subsample of the 2011 California Healthy Kids Survey (N=14,149). Items in the present analyses included present familial military affiliation (no one, parent, sibling); number of deployments (none, one, two or more); gender; grade; and race/ethnicity. Substance use items assessed whether the youth reported lifetime use of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, other drugs, or prescription drugs; and recent (past 30 days) use of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs.

Results: Multivariate analysis conducted in 2012 revealed that an increase in the number of deployments was associated with a higher likelihood of lifetime and recent use, with the exception of lifetime smoking.

Conclusions: These results indicate that experiences associated with deployment of a family member may increase the likelihood of substance use.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

While preparing for deployment, military service members and their family members should consider obtaining information on dealing with the psychological stressors associated with deployment. The service member who is deploying should continue to have regular conversations on their deployment with family members to ease the concerns of their children and siblings. Parents and caregivers of siblings and children who have a family member deploying should be mindful of the negative effects deployment can have on adolescents; they should aim to involve siblings and children in programs that provide emotional support and constructive use of time. Parents, family members, friends and school officials should monitor the behavior of siblings and children who have a family member deployed. Monitoring behavior could potentially lead to providing the emotional support necessary to prevent adolescents from turning to substance use to manage their anxiety about a deployed family member. Schools and communities should also collectively organize support networks for military youth. Adults in the youths' lives might consider confirming that the adolescent understands that deployment can be difficult but that it is temporary and does not equate to the loss of the deployed loved one. Counseling should be readily accessible to adolescents experiencing the deployment of a family member. Similarly, there should be safe spaces for adolescents to share their psychological concerns and receive solid support. Siblings and children of deployed military service members should communicate their concerns and struggles about the deployment. Clinicians should be cognizant of potential substance use among adolescents with a deploying or deployed family member. Clinicians should discuss pending deployments with adolescents to ensure they are adequately addressing the transition. Clinicians should also screen adolescents who have a family member deploying for substance use problems.

FOR POLICY

Policy makers should consider funding additional school-based and community-based emotional support programs for adolescents with a deployed family member. Policy makers should also consider funding programs that assist family members and friends who are supporting adolescents with a deployed family member. The programs should be centered on managing the challenges associated with deployment and the reintegration process. Many commanding officers advise their soldiers to connect with their families while they are deployed to reduce the stress on themselves and their family members. Military service branches might consider adjusting their training for deployment to include additional instructions on family interactions while deployed. Because tours in Afghanistan and Iraq are longer than tours in previous wars, policy makers might consider implementing policies that shorten maximum tour durations or allow for more visits home during a tour.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since the completion of this study, there has been an increase in research on the effect deployment has on adolescents. Besides this study, the authors know of no other quantitative studies that focused on siblings. More research is needed on how deployment affects youth, particularly siblings. Future studies should investigate alternative coping mechanisms for youth dealing with the deployment of a family member, as well as the efficacy of other programs and resources in reducing difficulties associated with deployment of siblings. This study suggests that adolescents may not ever become comfortable with deployments. Future studies should investigate why more deployments lead to an increase in substance use, rather than a decrease as adolescents become more accustomed to family members being deployed. More military service members are entering the Reserves or National Guard upon discharge; often their families are less affiliated with the military but can experience the same stresses. Researchers should conduct research on families of Reserve/National Guard service members to determine the specific challenges deployment has for family members in this population. Researchers should further examine the role friends and other outside forces have on youth with a deployed sibling or parent, as well.

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