Effects of Parental Separation on the Academic Achievement of Children of Military Personnel

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Abstract

This study gauged the effects of parental separation on the academic achievement and social/emotional behavior of children of military personnel. Data were gathered from the school records of N=28 fifth grade students in a Department of Defense European-based elementary school. The Teacher's Perception of Social Attributes (TPSA) and Teacher's Perception of Child Emotional Behavior (TPCEB) checklists were administered to elementary school teachers to compare differences in social and emotional functioning in children who experienced parental deployment and children whose parents were not deployed.

Children of military personnel in American schools across Europe experience a higher than normal amount of parental separation as military personnel are called to duty in geographically distant locations. These servicemen and women, 46 percent of whom are fathers and mothers, must separate from their loved ones for upwards of fifteen months at a time, and in some cases longer (Buckholtz 2009). These military-induced separations can have devastating effects on children, who are caught in the midst of an intense recurring separation cycle (Peebles-Kleiger and Kleiger 1994). For many children of military personnel living in Europe, their loved ones return for about eight months after about a 15-month separation and then prepare for yet another geographically distant tour of duty. Since the war on terror began, some children in military families are currently experiencing their parent's second, third, or even fourth cycle of separation (Buckholtz 2009).

Since children spend a significant amount of their day in the classroom, school teachers and staff members are in a key position to observe some of the effects of parental separation on children. They can also be instrumental in helping to provide a stable environment, albeit a learning one. Teachers provide a sense of connection, continuity, and security for students. They can be someone a student can talk to, particularly if trust and rapport has been established. Classrooms provide a home away from home—a safe haven for most students. Thus, when there are changes transpiring for students external to the school environment, frequently behaviors will manifest in the educational setting that may be evident to the teacher. Nonnormative behaviors manifested

by children have a potential impact on learning, and academic achievement. Parental separation in some cases can be a traumatic experience and may lead to social, emotional, and/or behavioral changes in children that affect different aspects of their lives (Hiew1992; Yeatman 1981). Teachers can serve as an important interface between parent and child in terms of conveying helpful information to the non-deployed parents. Teachers are also in a position to work in concert with a school counselor in assisting the child to make a more functional adaptation to their environment despite the trauma of parental separation.

This paper is based on a study of fifth graders at a European-based Department of Defense elementary school whose subjects are predominantly children of military personnel and many of whose parents experienced repeated deployment into combat zones. This study sought to identify children who experienced educational, emotional, and social difficulties as a result of their parent's military deployment via children's school records and teachers' perceptions of students' behavior. It was expected that the outcome of this research would facilitate the development of effective interventions to help avert, postpone, or delay more serious psychological and behavioral challenges.

Background

The literature found military family members are all affected by military-induced separations (Knapp and Newman 1993; Kelley 1994; Kelley, Hock, Smith, Jarvis, Bonney and Gaffney 2001; Peebles-Kleiger and Kleiger 1994; Yeatman 1981). Depending on the type of deployment—whether routine or wartime deployment—stress levels for family members and soldiers fluctuated according to the degree of danger involved (Cozza, Chur and Polo 2005; Kelley 1994; Kelley et al 2001; Hillenbrand 2001; Jensen and Shaw 1993). Overall, boys have a more difficult time adjusting to military deployments and father absence due to divorce or other types of separations than girls (Bain, Boersma and Chapman 1983; Pierce, Vinokur and Buck 1998; Rosen, Teitelbaum and Westhuis 1993), especially younger boys (Lyle 2006).

There are differences concerning the reaction of children concerning their parent's deployment. Applewhite and Mays (1996) found no significant difference whether a father or mother deployed, while Lyle (2006) revealed children whose mother deployed fared worse than when children's fathers deployed. Several studies indicated that whether the separation between mothers and/or fathers and their children were due to military deployment or father absence due to other reasons, children often reacted or adapted in relation to how their mother reacted or adapted to her given situation (Applewhite and Mays 1996; Hillenbrand 2001; Kelley 1994; Knapp and Newman 1993; Levai, Kaplan,

Ackerman and Hammock 1995; Pierce, et al 1998; Rosen et al 1993).

Regarding teachers' assessments of children in general, these were not very positive. Young female students were rated above male students in social behavior measures, regardless of race (Rong 1996). Students' social and emotional behaviors were rated as more rejecting for students who demonstrated externalizing behaviors—which male students had at least twice the likelihood of developing (Sternlof, Pace and Beesley 2005; Liljequist and Renk 2007). Teachers with five or less years of experience felt more positive toward children overall than did teachers with six to eleven years of teaching experience (Sternlof et al 2005).

Most of the research literature focused on either academic achievement variables or social-emotional behavior in children. The majority of these studies have used either parent or teacher rating scales to look for differences in children's social-emotional functioning during a parental separation.

> Is there evidence of greater adjustment difficulty among young boys whose parents are absent due to deployment when compared to young boys whose parents are not deployed?

Girls with absent fathers have scored lower in quantitative ability in several studies from both military and nonmilitary family studies.

> Will math scores on the TerraNova standardized testing used by children of military personnel, reveal similar findings in girls who participate in this study?

> In what ways might educators working with children of military personnel facilitate adaptive coping strategies for military families experiencing the absence of a parent?

Method

A cross-sectional descriptive-exploratory study was conducted with two units of analysis: social artifacts (fifth graders' school records) and individuals (fifth-grade teachers). Parental consent was obtained for access to fifth graders' school records. Study criteria for school record included: (1) child currently being in fifth grade, (2) one parent being on active duty status, (3) one parent on deployment for at least 90 days at the time the study took place, and (4) parental consent for study participation. One third of the potential study participants' parents had received duty station transfer orders immediately prior to the study beginning, substantially decreasing subject pool. Letters were sent home with children explaining the study along with consent forms for return to their teachers who would, in turn, forward the documents to the school counse-

lor (first author). An untold number of letters/consents may have been lost and/or misplaced adding to those households deciding not to participate. A total of 28 signed consents were returned by parents agreeing their child's school record could be included in the research. Two of the study variables included attendance and tardiness. To obtain this information, the researcher accessed the school's Student Management Solutions™ (SMS) system, a computer software program developed by the Chancery Software Company that stores various student data. Data were collected the week of October 27, 2007.

The second part of the sample included the five fifth grade teachers at the study school. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on the social behavior of each of their students. Teachers completed questionnaires following the end of the regular school year 2007/2008. The study was fully explained and consent forms were provided to each one. They were assured that all data would be kept confidential, that no one would be singled out in any way, that participation was voluntary, and failure to participate would in no way jeopardize their job or any benefits to which they were entitled.

There were three data collection instruments used in the conduct of this study. The School Data Record was designed for gathering general information from students' files including birth date, gender, grade point average, total days of school attendance, days of student tardies, parent's marital status, and TerraNova Math scores. The Teacher's Perception of Social Attributes (TPSA) is a 25-item multidimensional scale that rated students' social behaviors. The TPSA was taken in part from the Social Attributes Checklist (SACL) cited by McClellan and Katz (2001) and McClellan and Kinsey (1999). Questions were asked in three areas: individual attributes, social skills, and peer relationships that together assess a child's social-emotional development and competence according to McClellan and Katz (2001). Teachers indicated on each questionnaire whether a particular student's parent(s) was/were deployed for military purposes over the course of the school year. The response categories of the TPSA are ordinal and follow a Likert scale format.

Teacher's Perception of Child's Emotional Behavior (TPCEB) consists of a five-question index of items generally associated with nonpsychotic depression in youth modified from Herrerías (2005). Questions relate to the appearance of a child's sadness, his or her ability to make friends, an appearance of imposed isolation, a tendency to not engage in social activities, and a general assessment of depression. This brief index is a pencil-and-paper measure with Likert response categories. Data distinguishing students with deployed parents from those whose parents had not been deployed during the school year

were obtained from the TPSA. In three instances, teachers indicated a problem with recall. In those cases, a follow-up telephone call was placed to the spouse, unit commander or first sergeant, or in the event the child's parent was still deployed, the rear-detachment first sergeant, to ensure accuracy of the data. Since school personnel maintain strong working relationships with the unit commanders and military families alike, information as to a soldier's deployment status was easily obtainable.

Results

This study explored whether there were differences in TerraNova math scaled scores and grade point averages of student's academic performance in the classroom. This study further explored whether there were differences in teacher's perceptions of children's social and emotional behavior as rated by the Teacher's Perception of Social Attributes between children who experienced parental separation as compared to children who did not experience parental separation. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data given the small sample size. The authors felt than any other statistical analysis may not provide meaningful data give the limited number of school records.

Sample Demographics

The Children

The school records of fifth grade students were reviewed as part of this research. However, missing data from two children's school records resulted in only 26 cases being used for data analysis. Students' records fell into two groups. The first group (n=17) consisted of students who did not experience an extended parental separation during the academic year. The second group (n=9) consisted of students who experienced a parental separation of at least six months during the 2006-2007 school year. The first and second groups are hereafter referred to as No Parental Deployment (NPD) and Parental Deployment (PD), respectively. Table 1 shows the students' age, gender, and ethnic backgrounds.

The Parents

The NPD group (n=19) had eighteen married parents (94.7%) and one single parent (5.3%). Gender was not obtained for this group. The largest group of parents consisted of junior enlisted noncommissioned officers (53%) following by senior noncommissioned officers (21%). There were 16% officers and civilians, respectively, who were affected by repeated deployments as well. Genders of deployed parents for students from the PD group were almost all male except for one female. Everyone of the PD group was married. Thirty-three percent of the PD group was junior noncommissioned officers, 22% were

senior noncommissioned officers, and 33% were officers. Most of the students' parents were in the U.S. Army and worked primarily in transportation, communications, or as military police officers.

The Teachers

Teachers participated in the study by completing the TPSA and TPCEB rating scales. Sixty percent of the teachers were female with a mean age of 45 (S.D. 10.95). Forty percent of the teachers were Caucasian and 60% were African American. Overall, 20% of the teachers had completed at least some graduate work, 40% had earned a master's degree, and 40% had completed post-graduate work. Teachers reported a mean of 22 years of teaching experience (S.D. 10.37). Their teaching experience at the fifth-grade level showed a mean of 11.2 years (SD 10.38).

There were differences in the GPAs of both the NPD and PD groups. The median GPA for NPD and PD groups are 3.70 and 3.55, respectively. Smaller differences were found in the TerraNova math scaled scores. The median score for the TerraNova math score is 660 for the NPD group and 659 for the PD group. The median percentile rank for the NPD and PD groups are 61 and 60, respectively. Table 2 shows the breakdown of the mean scores.

Table 1

Students' Age, Gender and Ethnicity

	NPD (n=17) N(%)	PD (n=9) N(%)
Age		
Mean	11.3	11.1
SD	3.9	4.4
Gender		
Male	10(52.6)	3(33.3)
Female	9(47.4)	6(66.7)
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	10(52.6)	4(44.4)
Bi-racial	4(21.1)	2(22.2)
African American	3(15.8)	1(11.1)
Hispanic	2(10.5)	2(22.2)

Table 2

Student GPA & TerraNova Math Scores

	NPD (n=17) Mean(S.D.)	PD (n=9) Mean(S.D.)
GPA		
Fall 2007	3.49 (.1289)	3.26 (.2511)
Spring 2008	3.55 (.1278)	3.37 (.2318)
Cumulative	3.53 (.1239)	3.31 (.2389)
TerraNova Score	662.94 (7.56)	658.89 (7.25)
Percentile rank	61.31 (6.02)	59.00 (6.61)

Differences were found between the absences and tardies each semester in both the NPD and PD group. Median absences are 7.56 and 11 for the NPD and PD groups, respectively. Median tardies are 1.00 and .00 for the NPD and PD groups, respectively. Table 3 provides more details. The results of the TPSA found that children from the NPD group had a score of 86.25 (S.D.72), with those in the PD group scoring 75.89 (S.D. 8.61).

The higher the score, the greater observation of social attributes on the part of the children. On the other hand, the higher the score with the TPCEB, the higher the number of a child's emotional behavior. The NPD group scored 7.38 (S.D.97), whereas the PD group scored 9.89 (S.D. 2.03).

Table 3
Student Absences and Tardies

	NPD (n=17) Mean(S.D.)	PD (n=9) Mean(S.D.)
Absences		
Fall 2007	3.75 (1.28)	4.33 (1.17)
Spring 2008	3.81 (1.41)	6.67 (1.98)
Total Absences	7.56 (1.99)	11 (2.42)
Tardies		
Fall 2007	1.06 (.423)	.44 (.35)
Spring 2008	.88 (.38)	.33 (.17)
Total Tardies	1.94 (.66)	.78 (.43)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the academic achievement and behavioral and socioemotional functioning between children whose parents were deployed and children whose parents were not deployed. The results of this study were consistent with several of the studies in the research literature (Bain et al 1983; Lyle 2006; Bernstein 1976; Hillenbrand 2001; Kelley et al 2001; Rosen et al 1993; Sternlof et al 2005; Liljequist and Renk 2007). The major findings of the current study found some differences between students experiencing parental deployment and students in the nondeployed group in terms of academic achievement, school absences, behavioral or socioemotional functioning. There was almost no difference in the number of days that students from each group were late to school.

Student academic achievement was affected as students in the PD group had a cumulative GPA of 3.31 (S.D. .2389) compared to those in the NPD group who had a cumulative GPA of 3.53 (S.D. .1239). The TerraNova score was 658.89 (S.D. 7.25) and 662.94 (S.D. 7.56) for the PD and NPD groups, respectively showing the NPD group with a slightly higher math score. Consistent findings were discovered in Bain et al (1983) whose research supports the current study. Their findings on the effects of father absence on academic achievement found no significant differences in math test scores. The only significant difference between groups with a father absent or father present, were found in reading scores, but not in math or spelling. Even when a comparison of girls with absent fathers was looked at against boys with present fathers, the only difference remained in reading scores, not math. In their study, gender differences were investigated to compare differences between boys and girls (Bain et al 1983). Boys with absent fathers scored lower than girls with absent fathers in all academic areas, including math. In the current study, the opposite was found. In the PD group, girls (n=6) had a slightly lower math scaled score (658.66) than boys (n=3) did (659.33). In the NPD group, girls (n=9) again, were found to have slightly lower math scaled scores than boys (n=10) (664.44). These findings were marginal.

Lyle (2006) used standardized math test scores to gauge academic achievement in children of military personnel experiencing a military-induced separation or numerous family relocations. For children who experienced a military-induced separation or numerous family relocations, Lyle found only slight effects (a tenth of a standard deviation) in children's academic achievement. Lyle's modest findings revealed the greatest detrimental effects on academic achievement were on children with single parents whose mothers were in the Army, children with lower ability parents (i.e.,

less educational background, low military rank, etc.), and younger children. This finding based on demographic variables was not consistent with the current study where students of enlisted parents out scored students with officer parents, sometimes by large margins. Lyle's study also looked at parent's military rank as a demographic variable and found that children of military officers that experienced a military-induced separation of seven months or more in a four-year period had a two-point decline in their math scores compared to a 1.5-point decline in children of enlisted soldiers the same type and duration of separation. In the current study, the top two student scores on TerraNova and highest grade point averages belonged to students of enlisted parents. For example, their average scaled math score was 689 (86th national percentile rank), whereas the top two students of officer parents had an average scaled math score of 637.1 (39th national percentile rank).

The large discrepancy in scores led to taking a closer look at GPA to see if there was a similar gap between the two groups. When their grade point averages were compared, students of officer as compared to enlisted parents were almost the same, 3.68 to 3.67, respectively. Another study that is consistent with the current one was Bernstein (1976). Her study also looked at fifth-grade student test scores at an elementary school. Due to a low sample size of participants without fathers (n=14), Bernstein controlled for this difference by comparing the groups on the basis of how each participant's math score differed from their own verbal score. No significant differences were found to exist between the two groups with absent or present fathers in the family. In her review of the literature, Bernstein had found studies on absent fathers that were related to depressed math scores for boys. Contrary to this finding, girls' math scaled scores were marginally lower than boys' math scaled scores (658.66 versus 659.33, respectively).

Hillenbrand (2001) looked at (N=126) students in sixth grade of a school for military dependents to assess effects of father absence on children's academic development, classroom behavior, parental dominance, and family constellation. Two key findings that relate to the current study were depressed quantitative ability in girls with absent fathers. Though in the current study, girls had only marginally lower math scaled scores than boys (658.66 versus 659.33). The other significant finding was that as the amount of father absence increased, the more internalizing behavior in boys was witnessed by classroom teachers.

There appeared to be no relationship between GPA and absences. Two students with the highest number of absences (21 & 25) had cumulative GPAs of 3.587 or higher and were from the NPD group. The highest num-

ber of absences in the PD group was by two students who were both absent 17 and 18 times each. Their GPAs were 3.887 and 2.925, respectively. In terms of tardies, students in the NPD group were more than twice as likely to be late to school as those from the PD group.

Teachers rated students from the NPD group as exhibiting more socially oriented attributes than students from the PD group. Alternately, teachers perceived students' emotional behavior functioning less well in the PD group and in the NPD group. While statistical significance was determined, the findings are suggestive of stress experienced by children with a deployed parent.

There was one case in particular of obvious depressive symptomatology from among the PD group. A classroom teacher witnessed what she described as extreme internalizing behavior and reported it on the TPSA and TPCEB. This is further discussed later. Academic achievement was affected as well, which is in keeping with the Hillenbrand's (2001) findings although on a much smaller scale.

As one would expect, not all of the literature in this area was consistent with this study. Kelley et al (2001) findings of children with deploying parents were found to have significantly higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors when compared to children with nondeploying parents. This study also found some difference between the study groups. There are age differences between the two studies however. Kelley et al (2001) looked at very young children (1 to 5 years old), whereas the current study consisted of fifth grade students, with an overall mean of 11.2 years of age. It may be that due to older children being more cognitively developed, higher order coping skills to respond to environmental stressors, such as a parental separation, enabled them to adapt more effectively.

Rosen et al (1993) looked at the psychological profiles of military children whose parents were deployed. Remaining parents at home filled out a modified Child Health Inventory to state their children's most prevalent symptoms during the parental deployment, as well as a Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL) that measured mother's symptoms. Results of the problems children experienced most revealed the strongest predictor of a child needing counseling due to deployment, was if the child had a previous history of counseling for emotional problems. Another variable that increased a child's vulnerability was a history of poor academic performance. Lastly, if a mother scored high on the HSCL variable, then there was a significance related to symptoms of both the eldest and second child, including sadness, eating problems, nightmares, and a perceived need for counseling.

These children are the ones that the Sternlof et al (2005) and Liljequist and Renk (2007) studies refer to as

the type of students most at risk for being rejected by peers and teachers alike, or whose behaviors, whether they be internalizing (withdrawn, anxious) or externalizing (ADHD), often *turn off* their classmates and teachers. Though, as pointed out in both studies, teachers found students with externalizing more bothersome and were more rejecting of them when compared to students with internalizing behaviors. One reason this may be so is that studies have shown teachers believe internalizing behaviors to be biologically based, where the student inherited the behavior traits (anxiety, depression, etc.) and may therefore be more empathic and understanding of them. In contrast, externalizing behaviors are seen as more environmental in nature, with teachers commonly expecting children to demonstrate greater personal control over their behavior.

Still not all of the students whose teachers rated behaviors of social and emotional scales appeared to fair equally through the deployment. In particular, one significant outlier was found in a female student in the PD group. This student received the lowest scores possible by her teacher on both social adaptive and emotional behavior scales, which indicated the student was experiencing significant behavioral and emotional problems (internalizing behavior) when her parent was deployed. The student in question also had mediocre academic performance and was perhaps a representation of significant change in behavior due to her father being deployed.

Two factors known to the study may hold plausible explanations—cultural differences or physical development. The student comes from a Hispanic background, where females commonly share very close bonds with their fathers. A second possible reason for her extreme scores may have been that because of her age. Her physical development may have been a factor in her adjustment difficulties. Girls in prepubescent stages of development may be especially vulnerable for negative life outcomes when exposed to an environmental stressor, such as having an absent father. Another possible reason may be that this girl was a psychologically more vulnerable child or that her mother experienced greater difficulty adjusting to the deployment. This finding may suggest that certain children are more vulnerable to the effects of having a deployed parent than others. It is not possible to discern if the challenges faced by this particular student were pre-existing conditions to her father's deployment.

Applied Practical Implications

The findings in this study provide support for future clinical practice in counseling, developmental psychology and social work with military families. The research findings provided by the study lend support to Bowlby's (1969, 1976, 1980) central premise on

attachment theory, which posits the importance of primary caretaker-child attachment. If, in fact, the mother continues in the primary caretaking role and remains in the home while fathers continue to be the ones being deployed, it makes sense that children are not manifesting greater social, emotional, or behavioral stressors. Nevertheless, there are any number of practical applications that can be employed in assisting families that are left without parent who has left for military assignment elsewhere.

Numerous parents have confided in teachers and the school counselor about the challenges faced once their spouse has been deployed, sometimes for a second, third, or fourth rotation of duty. Mutual aid can be a great source of comfort and camaraderie so facilitating networking and establishing support groups that meet regularly among spouses with deployed loved ones would be helpful.

Another practical outcome for schools who serve children of military personnel is to implement deployment group counseling for children. For example, at the American school where the senior author is employed as a school counselor, he is responsible for facilitating many deployment groups for children who are experiencing parental separation due to a military-induced separation. Students are grouped by grade level or by classroom as there can frequently be half of one classroom whose children have a parent that is deployed at one time. In the early stages, deployment groups are introduced to the region where their parents are deployed to, the people they are there to help, its culture, traditions and physical geography, among other topics. The groups talk about the important jobs American soldiers have there, such as helping rebuild schools, training local nationals to become self-sufficient, and forming positive relations with the local people. After the initial lessons about the deployment are finished, the focus turns to school related tasks, such as schoolwork, or students will often times engage in educational games that foster friendship and positive social skills. Similar application is espoused by Huebner (2005) who suggests activities such as mentoring, recognizing depression in youth, documenting events and rituals during absences, and connecting children with youth serving organizations.

Yet another application of this study derives from the use of the deployment group counseling groups already in use at the American school. Children that are experiencing particular challenges with their parent's deployment are identified by teachers and referred to the school counselor who counsels with these children in smaller groups at least twice weekly depending upon the need of the group or individual student. Essentially, during the time their parents are away, students are provided a space within the counselor's office to lean on each other for support and to help ensure the

challenges of negotiating a lengthy separation go as smoothly as possible.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study suggested that students with a deployed parent are somewhat affected by separation from their parent. At the same time, they are able to successfully adapt to lengthy separations. This was true even when those separations took their parent to hostile, combat environments like Iraq and Afghanistan. These findings are encouraging as they suggest a certain resiliency in children of military personnel.

Without definitive evidence, one can speculate that a lack in declining academic achievement scores was likely due to a number of factors. First, schools that are accustomed to serving children of military personnel have firsthand knowledge of the special challenges faced by youth with lengthy parental deployments. Thus, institutional support from these schools may have been a source of major support for children and their remaining family members. Official hearings before congressional committees on children and families provide personal testimony as to the effectiveness of "On-post schools." Teachers are more often than not spouses of servicemen who are called to duty in geographically distant locations.

Personal experience and access to military resources on the installations helps teachers experiencing a deployment themselves to better negotiate a separation from their loved ones. For teachers who have the personal experience of going through a deployment, a deeper attachment to their students who are also experiencing a deployment is not uncommon. Teachers and students experiencing deployment separations year after year have come to accept deployments as a *norm* of military life. This frequently allows teachers and students to form special bonds.

Teachers' experiences with children who have faced numerous parental separations do not always perceive these children's behavior as extraordinary given their situations. As such, teachers may simply accommodate acting-out, withdrawn or other symptomatic behavior. Perhaps these veteran educators accept these children as acting normally, disregarding otherwise socially or behaviorally unacceptable comportment because of the extenuating circumstances.

Finally, children show amazing resiliency in the face of enormous crisis, trauma, and change. They are able to adapt and grow in the process—most not all—rise to the challenge. We need to work toward ensuring the supports are there to facilitate that rise for all of them.

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