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# The Parenting Cycle of Deployment

Ellen R. DeVoe, PhD; Abigail Ross, MSW, MPH

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**ABSTRACT** Parents of dependent children comprise approximately 42% of Active Duty and National Guard/Reserve military members serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom. Recent estimates indicate that more than two million children have experienced parental deployment since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. This article seeks to characterize the impact of the deployment life cycle on parenting roles among service members and at-home partners/caregivers of dependent children. Specifically, a new conceptual framework is presented for considering the ways in which parenting and co-parenting processes are affected by the demands and transitions inherent in contemporary deployment to a war zone. Although the phase-based emotional cycle of deployment continues to offer an instructive description of the broad challenges faced by military couples, a parenting cycle of deployment model shifts the perspective to the critical and largely ignored processes of parenting in the context of deployment and war, and to the realities faced by parents serving in the U.S. military. Implications for prevention, intervention, and future research related to military families are addressed.

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## INTRODUCTION

Parents comprise approximately 42% of Active Duty and National Guard/Reserve (NG/R) personnel serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.<sup>1</sup> Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, approximately two million children have been affected by the deployment of at least one parent.<sup>2</sup> The characteristics of 21st century wars have important implications for service member parents and the families. For example, the high operational tempo and the length of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have required more frequent deployment rotations, higher exposure to combat, and heavy reliance on NG/R components.<sup>3</sup> Medical and transportation advances have resulted in a 90% survival rate among injured service members,<sup>4</sup> and a new generation technology allows real-time communications home. In this article, we identify specific challenges and transitions that parents face in their parenting roles as they and their children cope with prolonged separation and reintegration inherent in deployment. Recognizing the centrality of children in the lives of military families,<sup>5</sup> we re-examine the oft-cited emotional cycle of deployment framework through the lens of parenting and propose a new parenting cycle of deployment model.<sup>6</sup>

## THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT FOR ADULTS

The “emotional cycle of deployment,” theorized by Logan (1987) and later adapted,<sup>7,8</sup> describes a series of transitions that service members and their partners encounter beginning with notification of an upcoming deployment and lasting throughout the postdeployment reunion and reintegration periods.<sup>7,9</sup> In the model, phases of adjustment for the service member and

partner are as follows: (1) Predeployment, (2) Deployment, (3) Sustainment, (4) Redeployment, and (5) Postdeployment, now commonly referred to as “Reintegration.”<sup>7,8,10</sup> We suggest that accompanying each phase are logistical and emotional transitions for the service member and partner in their roles as parents, and that the deployment cycle itself functions as a critical social context for parenting.

## THE SOCIAL-CONTEXTUAL DETERMINANTS OF PARENTING

An ecological approach contributes to an understanding of how the same lived experience, the cycle of deployment, may result in different outcomes within families, and is in part the ability of caregiver(s) to support the child(ren).<sup>11,12</sup> Consistent with this view, we apply the principles of Belsky’s (1984) process model of the determinants of parenting within a broad ecological framework to elucidate the parenting cycle of deployment. In particular, we endorse the assertion that parental competence is multiply determined, and includes primary and independent contributions deriving from (1) parent characteristics, (2) developmental and temperamental status of the child, and (3) sources of contextual stress and support.

Within the deployment life cycle, specific contextual stressors will be influenced by the service member’s component, rank, unit cohesiveness, deployment schedules, mission, and roles in theater and at home. For parents at home, deployment-related stressors include real-time media coverage of the wars, the community’s support for or disapproval of the wars, unit support at home, and a community’s ability to recognize and attend to the needs of military-connected parents and children. Within the family system, parent and child responses and needs will have reciprocal and cumulative influence both among members, within each parent–child relationship, and throughout the family’s ecology. Research has since highlighted the potential buffering effect of parenting and the parent–child relationship for children in conditions of stress, danger, and trauma.<sup>13–18</sup> As applied to deployment, children

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will be most protected when parents and caregivers are able to fulfill parenting roles and utilize supports despite the strains of service and separation. Likewise, children will be most vulnerable when parental mental health and parenting capacity are compromised. In the remainder of the article, we describe salient transitions associated with each phase of deployment, with a specific focus on parental role and parenting function.

## PARENTING CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT MODEL

In this model, we identify 7 processes commonly experienced by military parents as they travel through a single deployment. These components are based upon the centrality of children in many military families and the corresponding importance of parental roles and responsibilities. Although parenting in any context requires constant adjustment to new developmental and social realities, the military context necessitates adaptation to the transitions, planned and unanticipated, uniquely associated with deployment (See Fig. 1 below).<sup>19</sup> Specifically, during the predeployment period, parents must consider how to shape the family's future and stability in light of the deployment (Looking Ahead) and inevitably face the service member's actual departure overseas (Saying Good-Bye). During the separation, each parent finds, either by default or design, parenting routines (Parenting from War Zone/Parenting from Homefront), which can be adaptive in supporting parent-child relationships and child well-being. With notification of the "redeployment" date, the family experiences a sense of anticipation including excitement, worry, hope, and expectation (Surviving the Homestretch). During postdeployment, parenting and co-parenting dynamics reflect the often uneven and unexpected demands of family life after the service member returns. Beginning with the deployed parent's often rapid and intense immersion back into U.S. culture and family and a corresponding shock to the family system, parents and children begin the process of adapting to new or renewed family constellations, member status, and parenting strategies. Over time, families adjust as they incorporate deployment-related

experiences, and parents continue to invest in their children through their relationships and parenting efforts (Facing Reality/Moving Forward).

## PARENTING TASKS AND TRANSITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH PHASE OF DEPLOYMENT

### Predeployment

The predeployment period is typically experienced as a "time of significant stress."<sup>3</sup> In new research, the waiting time leading to departure has been characterized as a "holding pattern" for the family during which adaptation cannot yet begin.<sup>20</sup> When to inform a partner and children can be a significant source of consternation for deploying parents and may be compounded either by a narrow or by a lengthy window between notification and departure.<sup>21,22</sup> NG/R parents may be especially stressed by limited access to critical information, resources, and social supports otherwise available to installation-based families, and less preparation for deployment to a war zone.<sup>23</sup>

### Looking Ahead

As departure approaches, partners and service members alike may respond with detachment, anticipatory grief, conflict, or communication challenges. Significant concerns for the at-home parent include how to deal with the practical realities of raising children and running a household, while managing worries about the parent in theater. Pregnant women may be anxious about delivering a baby and handling the demands of parenthood without their partners. Similarly, the service member is often concerned about how the family will fare and what she or he will face during the deployment.<sup>24,25</sup> For deploying parents, a major source of tension may be conflict between the push to "ramp up" with the unit's training regimen and the pull to spend time with family and loved ones before departure. For the at-home parent, there is also conflict between wanting the service member to be as prepared as possible for the mission but also wishing for closeness.

Parents also must struggle with how and when to communicate with their child(ren) about the impending departure. How much time children need to prepare for and say good-bye varies according to each child's developmental level and temperament. For example, because younger children have not yet developed a linear and reality-based sense of time, it may be difficult for them to "hold" this information for long periods of time. Older children and adolescents may need more time to process the information while the deploying parent is still physically present and can provide support and explanation. Both parents must handle their own emotional reactions while simultaneously responding to their children's bewilderment, anger, sadness, or fear upon learning the news.

### Saying Good-bye

The act of saying good-bye is itself an important and oft-repeated ritual for military-connected families, especially for



FIGURE 1. The parenting cycle of deployment.

children and adolescents. Training can result in long periods of separation before the actual deployment overseas, which potentially increases family stress as a result of multiple departures and returns before “the real thing.” When the service member deploys to a combat zone, the meaning of the good-bye is inherently complex. An unspoken reality may be “This isn’t forever but what if it is?” For the service member, saying good-bye to a child may be so painful that a direct good-bye is avoided, such as leaving when the child is asleep or at school. Although well intentioned, when parents do not say good-bye face-to-face, the result may be that children become highly preoccupied with their parents’ whereabouts and when they might “disappear,” even when deployment is not a factor. Some parents, often new fathers, may dismiss or minimize their critical importance to their children, especially during preverbal developmental periods.<sup>26,27</sup> For these families, reassurance that the parent will be missed and remembered can be helpful in creating a “good” good-bye for both parents and children.

### **DEPLOYMENT SEPARATION PHASE**

The immediate period following the “real” good-bye has been described by adults as one of disorientation and mixed emotions, sometimes characterized by a sense of relief that the anticipation is finally over.<sup>1,7,21</sup> The feeling as though life is “on hold”<sup>28</sup> may give way to a sense of temporary relief at the point of departure and thus move the family one step closer to the service member’s return. At home, the departure brings forth a new set of parenting challenges, including how to respond to children’s distress, concerns, and queries. Younger children may begin to ask when the parent will return, why she or he left, and whether the remaining caregiver will also leave. Older children and adolescents are more able to understand the context of war and the potential threat to a parent in theater.<sup>29</sup> With social support, parents who are compromised in their psychological functioning are often still able to buffer their children from unnecessary distress<sup>30</sup> throughout the separation.

Over time, new routines emerge and sources of support are developed by both parents in their respective environments.<sup>8</sup> The primary parenting task for both parents throughout the separation is to cope adaptively with their own individual reactions and new responsibilities in order to support their children’s needs and reassure them of the ongoing integrity of the family despite the time, distance, and ambiguity of the circumstances (e.g., Refs. 29, 31, and 32).

### ***Parenting From the Home Front***

Acute feelings of upset and physiological reactions (loss of appetite, sleep problems) have been described by spouses and partners when a service member is in theater.<sup>3,7,20</sup> Normative reactions, such as feeling distressed over the loss of the partner and overwhelmed with the enormity of financial, household, and parenting responsibilities,<sup>7</sup> can be powerful. In a recent survey of at-home parents with deployed partners, the

most commonly endorsed stressors were increased parenting responsibilities (83%) and the need to support a child in dealing with the separation from the deployed parent (80%).<sup>33</sup> New research also indicates that as deployment continues, there is a decrease in “health promotion behaviors”<sup>34</sup> for home-front parents, reflecting increasing exhaustion as the separation wears on. Through interviews with NG/R spouses, Lapp and colleagues (2010) identified that lack of respite was the primary stressor during deployment. Specifically, at-home parents identified “going it alone” and “pulling double duty” as both mom and dad until and often beyond the service member’s return.<sup>20</sup> When the at-home parent is not able to fully stabilize, the accumulated and sustained stress increases mental health concerns for the parent and thus, the children during the deployment (e.g., Refs. 35–39). To the extent that the at-home parent becomes psychologically compromised, he or she may have depleted internal resources for sensitive parenting.

Recent research indicates that for children, deployment separation is almost universally stressful and can have negative effects on social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes.<sup>33,40</sup> Specifically, length of deployment has been found to be associated with greater psychological and physiological stress among children, perhaps especially when compounded by relocation, change of schools, and rearrangement of caregiving and routines.<sup>2,33,35,41,42</sup> Each disruption in the environment strains the child, thus requiring additional energy by the at-home parent to serve as a buffer from potentially adverse effects. When the at-home parent recognizes and responds to manifestations of increased stress in children and adolescents, they receive critical instrumental and emotional support along with the message that their caregiver is sturdy and will be able to care for them.

Many at-home parents manage the parenting demands of the separation successfully and are able to develop effective family routines, utilize social supports, and manage increased stress, parenting, and household responsibilities.<sup>20,33,42</sup> The experience of mastery and competence has been described among some military spouses as they gain confidence and newfound independence as they manage multiple and complex responsibilities on their own.<sup>20</sup> Role transformation among at-home parents who have never been on their own or who have not yet developed the skills to take full responsibility for household priorities reflects significant resilience and potential for growth among military families.

### ***Parenting From the War Zone***

We know little about how service members experience the transitions of deployment in their specific roles as parents. In part, research is limited because access to service members during deployment is necessarily restricted and highly complex. However, an emerging body of literature indicates that preoccupation with family well-being is a serious concern for service members in theater.<sup>23,25</sup> For decades, deployed fathers have been communicating from war zones as available communications technology has allowed.<sup>43,44</sup> Current research

has begun to capture the complexity of the parental role for deployed fathers who have greater ability for real-time communication with their families from overseas. In a study of recently returned fathers, participants described high levels of dependence on their partners for assistance in parenting; several indicated that unsupportive partners could increase an already difficult environment in theater.<sup>23</sup> Fathers emphasized that parenting stress directly influenced their abilities to perform their duties and described the competing demands of ensuring the safety of their own troops and themselves, protecting young child nationals, and attending to their own children's needs from afar. Service members also reported uncertainty about the amount and content of information that should be shared with children both during deployment and reintegration.<sup>23</sup>

Even less attention has been focused on parenting in deployed mothers, despite the fact that similar proportions of women (38%) and men (44%) in the military are parents.<sup>45</sup> Demographic factors compound already challenging circumstances for mothers who deploy. Specifically, military mothers are typically younger and of lower socioeconomic status relative to their male counterparts.<sup>45</sup> Service member mothers are also three times as likely to be single parents and five times as likely to be in dual-military couple relationships.<sup>45</sup> In a study of recently returned Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF/OIF) mothers of children ages 10 to 18 years, child care was among the most frequently reported stressors, along with absence of a primary parent in the home during deployment.<sup>46</sup>

Several elemental aspects of parenting from a deployment setting, for both mothers and fathers, include near-total reliance on others to facilitate contact with children at home and lack of control over the timing and length of communications and visitation with children during deployment (e.g., Rest & Relaxation).<sup>21</sup> Similarly, deployed mothers and fathers relinquish their daily involvement in parenting and adapt new strategies within the constraints of technology, distance, and attention. When parents are not able to participate in coordinated communication, the parent-child relationship may be disrupted beyond the impact of separation, thus increasing the risk of attachment insecurity and creating barriers to successful reintegration. These risks are especially concerning for very young children who cannot communicate independently with their deployed parent.

### ***Surviving the Homestretch: Great Expectations, Real Worries, All the Way Home***

In Logan's emotional cycle of deployment, notification of the return date begins a phase marked by increasing excitement and apprehension as reunion is anticipated.<sup>7,9</sup> Some service members may be reluctant to inform their families because the redeployment date can change, as happened frequently during the early years of OEF/OIF. Both service member parents and those at home must revisit the issue of informing their children given the developmental needs and capacities of the child

and the status of the returning service member (e.g., injury or disability). Notification of an end-date often precipitates a "counting the days" period, although the focus in the waning days of deployment is dramatically different for each parent. Although the at-home parent may feel able to "finally let my guard down," the deployed parent must continue to be vigilant about his or her own and the unit's safety and survival. Some at-home parents may give in to exhaustion at this point, whereas service members may be grappling with completion or success of the mission. Both service member and at-home parents may be concerned about how their children will respond to reunion, including whether very young children will recognize the returning parent.

## **REINTEGRATION PHASE**

### ***Facing Reality***

The reunion of service members with their partners and families has been called the "honeymoon" phase. Although reunions are full of joy and celebration, they can also place extraordinary demands on all family members. For example, service members may be transported from a combat zone to the family living room or neighbor's backyard in less than 72 hours. Although some are able to embrace this rapid return and immersion in life back home, others understandably experience culture shock and cannot assimilate in such a short time. For the latter group, partners and children may be misinterpret the "here but not here" quality of interactions (e.g., Ref. 1). Service members may feel unsure about how to reconnect and rebuild parent-child relationships after the separation. The returning parent may feel hurt or rejected when a child is slow to warm up, perceive that the family does not need him/her anymore, or experience anger from children. Sensitive and empathic parenting to these normative and often temporary child reactions is difficult unless parents have sufficient developmental knowledge to guide understanding. During this period, both the service member and the at-home parent experience stress around role negotiation related to parenting, household roles, and financial functioning.

Reintegration also may present unexpected co-parenting challenges in responding to emotional and/or behavioral reactions in children. For example, young children may develop separation anxiety focused on the returning parent, which complicates the service member's adjustment to home life.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, reminders of the deployment, such as wearing a military uniform, may precipitate emotional or behavioral distress in children. Older children can be resistant to changes in rules or routines as the returning parent is reintegrated while adolescents who have been "in trouble" may be fearful of the returning parent's reactions.<sup>29</sup> At-home parents may be reluctant to relinquish newly established independence or expect to "hand over" child care and household responsibilities. Couples often encounter conflict when the returning service member does not enforce the structure of the routine or may have the sense that "he's going back anyway so why make any

changes?” As co-parenting is renegotiated, the psychological well-being of each partner provides the foundation for sensitive and coordinated parenting, which can buffer children from the adverse effects of the deployment cycle.<sup>47</sup>

### **Moving Forward**

Parents and children are changed by deployment and separation. Thus, even among highly adaptive and resilient families, the end of deployment marks the beginning of new realities for each family member and the family system as a whole. When a service member suffers from mental health and/or physical injury as a result of war-related experiences, the family must contend with the acute and long-term implications related to care, the direct effects of disability on their loved one, and the impact of the home environment, including child behavior and needs, upon the returning parent.

“Signature” OEF/OIF injuries, specifically combat stress/post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), have been a major focus of research and media attention in recent years.<sup>48–51</sup> Current estimates indicate that up to 60% of injured service members present with symptoms of TBI,<sup>52</sup> and as many as 20% may have PTSD.<sup>53</sup> Further, over 20,000 children have a parent returning with a combat-related injury, excluding PTSD and TBI.<sup>54</sup> Research suggests that when a returning parent has war-related physical or emotional injuries, the re-establishment of parent–child relationships, communication, and effective parenting practices is a complex and stressful process for families.<sup>56</sup> Combat-related PTSD has been linked to self-reports of poorer parenting efficacy,<sup>55</sup> and parental injuries may affect the amount of time and energy available for attuned and sensitive parenting<sup>57,58</sup> (see Ref. 56 for a review). Interestingly, the at-home parent’s experience of stress may be a more accurate predictor of family functioning in families in which a deployed parent returns with a physical combat injury than the severity of the injury itself.<sup>59</sup>

This final stage of the parenting cycle of deployment represents the boundary between the initial reactive nature to the service member parent’s physical return to home and a more proactive and future-oriented stance later in the reintegration phase. As families move forward, parents are tasked with re-establishing the family system’s equilibrium, which includes development of new parenting routines and practices, and incorporating the legacy left by deployment into the family’s narratives and future.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**

Quality of parenting has emerged consistently as a central element associated with adaptive coping and resilience in children of all ages and in the context of diverse stressful or traumatic circumstances (e.g., Refs. 64–66). Although emerging literature contains excellent recommendations for parenting strategies that might aid in navigating deployment,<sup>20,29,36,44,56,60–62</sup> only a few empirical studies have examined the influence of the deployment life cycle with a specific focus on parenting practices.<sup>28,35,63</sup> A logical aim of prevention and interven-

tion efforts with military families should be the development of sustainable “buffered parenting systems” in which parents are supported in their ability to anticipate and respond sensitively to their children’s changing developmental and social-emotional needs in relation to the demands of the deployment cycle.

The parenting cycle of deployment is intended to serve as a preliminary conceptual model that can inform providers as they offer psychosocial support to families through all phases of deployment. Given both the diversity of U.S. military families and complexity of our service delivery systems, there is not likely to be a one-size-fits-all parenting support program that can be universally applied. However, the model suggests principles of care that can be incorporated into practice, including the ability to address divergent parenting realities for the at-home caregiver and the deployed service member during separation, and the availability of resources to facilitate the healthy reintegration of the service member into parenting and co-parenting roles.

The model also offers a roadmap for unit leadership, troops, and family members to enhance understanding of the challenges and concerns facing military parents and their partners through each transition. Ideally, programming could provide phase-specific psychoeducation, guidance, and support to military families beginning in the predeployment period and through reintegration. Specifically, providers can work with families to normalize parenting stress, anticipate “trouble spots” in future phases of the cycle, and develop communication strategies both related to parenting and parent–child interaction. Predeployment planning could focus specifically on developing co-parenting strategies, based upon each family’s unique characteristics related to stage of life, the ages and needs of the children, and the nature of the service member’s mission. Finally, a critical component for parenting support programs is continuity of care such that the family can be engaged confidentially and before deployment. The establishment of a trusting relationship with the provider before departure can ease concerns for both an at-home parent and a service member parent who is anxious about leaving the family and facilitate the reintegration process. Focused research and intervention are critical to address the parenting realities of military-connected families as they navigate the significant demands of the deployment cycle.

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