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Kids of deployed soldiers show psychological effects

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By [Amy Norton](#)

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Recent studies have shown that U.S. veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan are coming back with high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health problems. Now research suggests that deployment may be taking a toll on their kids, too: Children of U.S. service members deployed overseas may have an elevated risk of anxiety and other emotional difficulties.

In a study of 116 spouses of deployed Army personnel, researchers found that one-third of the participants' school-aged children were at high risk of so-called psychosocial problems. The most common ones were "internalizing" symptoms, such as being anxious, worried or crying more often.

The results, published in the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, are based on a screening questionnaire -- which means that the children deemed at "high risk" of psychosocial problems do not necessarily have them.

Still, the percentage that fell into the high-risk category is more than twice the U.S. norm. And in an older study of military children whose parents were not deployed, only 18 percent were found to be at high risk of psychological and social problems.

"Deployment and being separated from your family is a way of life in the military, and most families are pretty resilient," lead researcher Dr. Eric M. Flake told Reuters Health.

However, deployment during wartime is different, he pointed out.

"There's very little data in the new global war on terrorism on how kids are being affected," said Flake, who was based at Madigan Army Medical Center in Tacoma, Washington, at the time of the study, and is now at the Keesler Air Force Base Medical Center in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Many factors could potentially affect a child's well-being when a parent is deployed, according to Flake and his colleagues. In addition to having a parent in a wartime situation, children may also deal with other changes at home -- such as when the at-home parent decides to move back with his or her family during the deployment.

But the study also suggested ways to protect kids.

Flake's team found that 42 percent of surveyed parents -- who were mostly mothers -- reported high levels of parenting stress. These parents, in turn, were more likely to report psychosocial problems in their children.

In contrast, parents who said they turned to available military resources or other sources of support, such as their church or a community group, generally reported less stress and fewer problems in their children.

Flake said he thinks the military has "responded well," by developing programs for at-home parents and families to deal with their stress. Bases, for example, offer "family life consultants" who help families cope with

deployment or other issues.

There is also an online resource, MilitaryOneSource.com, that families can use as a "springboard" for getting any additional help they may need, Flake said. Yet, he added, there are still many families who do not know the site exists.

In addition to taking advantage of such services, parents could also take steps before deployment, Flake noted. He suggested that they try to identify and minimize any current stressors in their life, and set a structure for their children's daily routine that they keep up after a parent's deployment.

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