



Counseling Children of Deployed Family Members

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September 11, 2001, changed the world's view on many things. For children, this tragedy brought about a reality which they believed only existed in their history books—war. Oates (2002, p. 68) states, "In the period from September 14 through 30, 2001, 29,000 military personnel were deployed to the conflict region on brief notice and approximately 17,000 reservists were called to active duty." Consequently, professional counselors are faced with the challenge of assisting children and adolescents in dealing with the effects caused by deployment. Deployment doesn't affect just the military family; it affects the school and community as a whole.

Research on the effects of deployment on students is rare. However, much research exists on stress, anxiety, and fear in children and adolescents. Counselors can draw on this vast amount of research to work with students who have a deployed family member or members.

The Deployment Sequence

Deployment can best be defined as the time when military personnel are required to serve temporary tours of duty and cannot take the family (Military Child Education Coalition, 2004). The area where the soldier is called to serve can be a state or an ocean away from the family. No matter where an individual is called to serve, deployment is a time of transition with unique issues at every step.

Deployment can be illustrated in three stages: pre-deployment, deployment, and reunion (Military Child Education Coalition, 2003). The initial stage, pre-deployment, is the time prior to deployment. This period can last from months or weeks to just hours. During this stage, families attempt to adjust to the idea of one parent being away for an extended period of time. Maladjustment may occur when this stage happens rapidly, and the child is not given adequate time to adjust to the loss of a family member. Stress is often high during this time period.

The second stage is deployment. During this period, a family member is physically gone on a temporary duty assignment. Remember, this assignment may be across an ocean, in a dangerous circumstance, or right around the corner. In some instances, there may be a rapid deployment or a deployment without warning. Thus, the child is thrust into the second stage without the adjustment time allowed during the pre-deployment stage. This stage can further be complicated if the deployed individual is a single parent or if both parents are being deployed. This situation forces the child into another home life with grandparents or other

guardians who may or may not live near where the child currently lives.

The final phase is reunion. Reunion is best described as the time when families are reunited after deployment. This phase carries with it some very distinct characteristics such as readjustment to family life for the soldier and an additional parental figure for the child. Although each phase of the deployment cycle has its own unique issues and concerns, which can be handled separately, school is the one constant in the student's life. Therefore, the most important thing for the professional counselor to foster during this time is communication for the child and family.

Issues That May Arise During the Deployment Cycle

Issues arising during the varied parts of the deployment cycle will vary from not only child to child but also between age groups. However, they may overlap.

Pre-deployment. During pre-deployment, commonly seen issues that span all age groups are anxiety, shock, and disbelief (Collins, 2005). One key consideration for the counselor to remember during this time is that these children believe the safety and security of their lives is gone due to the parent's leaving. The stress level in many homes rises dramatically as a parent makes plans that most civilian, non-military individuals, take for granted (Kennedy, 2004). Add the emotional toll of leaving your family, hoping that you will have a means of communicating with them while you are away, and that they will have a strong support system while you are deployed, and it isn't hard to understand why these children need the support of everyone to adjust during this difficult time.

Deployment. When the parent or in some cases parents deploy, many children struggle with feelings of loss and grief. They work through the five stages of grief which individuals who have experienced a death or catastrophic event undergo: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Regardless of how children and their families begin the deployment cycle emotionally and cognitively, most find a way to cope and adjust to a "normal" way of life without the deployed parent or spouse. However, their "normal" may be completely dysfunctional.

Reunion. When a family is made aware that their loved one is returning, the emotional rollercoaster begins again. Children wonder how their parent will look when they return. They question whether the parent has changed or wonder if mom or dad will know who they are. Some children report being upset that their parent is returning.

The majority of the counselor's focus is on negative behaviors during deployment. However, there are some positive behavioral changes that may occur. Deployment can promote maturity, can facilitate personal growth, can foster independence, and can increase flexibility. Additionally, deployment can help build abilities for dealing with separations and losses later in life. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it helps strengthen family bonds (Military Child Education Coalition, 2001).

Behaviors to Look for During Deployment

Many of the behaviors discussed do not function within a specific age boundary. Therefore, for the purpose of this digest, the authors will not break them down within the specific cycle stages but will list the general school age categories and the corresponding concerns.

Preschool – Elementary Children: Anxiety, anger outbursts, confusion, regression in behaviors like thumb-sucking, overly concerned about losing someone else, overly cautious, clinging, and fear of things that they were not afraid of prior to deployment.

Middle school—junior high: Anxiety, anger outbursts, quick temper, depression, withdrawal from normally enjoyed activities, change in relationships with same-age friends, and choosing adults over friends.

High school: Eating difficulties, sleeping difficulties (may include nightmares), psychosomatic complaints of headaches, stomach aches, or other illnesses, irritability, increase in school problems such as grades or attendance, and behavioral changes.

At all levels changes in a child or adolescent's normal behavior should be monitored. Although behaviors have been broken into specific school ages, remember that symptoms can cross age boundaries depending on the maturity of the individual.

How the Professional Counselor Can Help

Individual and group counseling services are appropriate for all aforementioned concerns. Individual counseling may be more beneficial during the middle school through high school years depending on the various adolescent needs. At the elementary level, small group counseling with children on problem-solving skills, grief, and communication may be extremely valuable. In addition, classroom guidance activities can also focus on these issues (Oates, 2002).

Educate school staff members about how to deal with these students. Provide staff with information and handouts about how to respond to traumatic events. Also provide them with handouts on how to help students handle stress and how to help them handle their own stress. Encourage staff to be sensitive to students and each other during this time. Also advise staff members to watch voicing their personal opinions about what is going on—even when they think no students are listening.

Professional Counselors Can Make a Difference

When working with families during times of deployment, a counselor does not need to have all the answers. They should have knowledge about the deployment cycle, issues that may arise, and signs to look for in affected youth. Ultimately, these families are a puzzle and counselors must help them work at finding the pieces that connect to make their picture complete. Many of them cannot do it without some assistance from the professional counselor.

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