

## Children of the Army

I am a civilian psychiatrist who recently finished 20 months working as a contractor for the U.S. Army. Going into the job, I expected the degree of combat-related stress I saw in our troops. However, I was not prepared for the scope of impact our two long wars have had on military children.

Like most civilians with no military background, I didn't realize how many children there are in the Army. When the draft ended after Vietnam, the United States moved from a large Army of single soldiers, to an all-volunteer force full of families. Today, about 55% of the military is married, 1.9 million children have a parent in the military, and 700,000 children have had a parent deploy (1). In fact, in 2010 the active-duty sector of the Army actually had more children (570,000) than soldiers (562,000). (2)

The consequences of this shift in military structure are major. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan dragged on, the Army has had to recycle soldiers through multiple deployments, because our force is relatively small. Many Army families are resilient and cope well with the stress of deployments, but some do not. I met too many young parents in the infantry who were justifiably overwhelmed with the competing demands of going to war and raising kids—two pursuits that do not fit naturally together. Fights over finances, video addiction, and infidelity were rampant, and too often this escalated into substance abuse, domestic violence, child maltreatment, and/or divorce. And, of course, some parents die in battle.

The Army is open about these problems (2) and has greatly expanded mental health and other support services for soldiers and their families. However, despite these commendable efforts to help, nothing can change the fact that stressed parents make for stressed children. Mounting research evidence shows that military children have significantly increased emotional and behavioral problems when a parent is deployed. These problems increase with number and duration of parental deployments, and deployments cause mental health problems in the single parent left behind. All of these problems at home are compounded when the returning soldier has PTSD (1, 3, 4, 5).

I draw two conclusions from all this: 1) that the Army and military families deserve huge praise for their valiant service during this last decade; and 2) that our social experiment with an Army of children has gone too far. It was a reasonable approach after Vietnam, and worked in shorter conflicts such as Bosnia and the first Gulf war. However, at this point the cumulative stress of two prolonged ground wars has placed an undue burden on military children, and we should call a halt. We got Bin Laden, we're out of money, Afghanistan is a quagmire, and the "Arab spring" is doing fine without American boots on the ground. It's time to bring back the troops and put these parents where they belong, at home with their children.

So, what next? I think that the age of American expansion is over, and historical circumstances will force us to scale back our military engagements, which are too costly and far exceed our needs for self-defense. If so, then automatically there will be less American children exposed to war, even if we stick with our current military structure. But if I'm wrong and we continue to wage long wars, then we need to have a national discussion about how to do that while protecting children from the emotional wounds of war. All options would need to be considered, from modifying military recruitment and retention standards, to shortening deployments, to limiting combat roles for parents, to bringing back the draft if needed. But whatever we do, we ought never again expose so many American children so directly to the burdens of war.

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