

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

HOW A MILITARY SEPARATION FROM A PARENT AFFECTS A CHILD

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

PCP 562 ADVANCED HUMAN DEVELOPMENT I

BY

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SPRINGFIELD, MISSOURI

NOVEMBER 26, 2003

Introduction

Since the early 1970's, the United States military has been changing from consisting largely of single men to consisting of more married men. Close on the heels of this transformation has been another metamorphosis: women are increasingly filling the ranks, up to 12.6% in the Air Force back in 1992 (Blacksmith, 1992). Wherever there are women, single or married, and wherever there are married men, there are dependent children. This common sense fact and its subsequent implications apparently took the nation by surprise when military forces were deployed for Desert Shield/Storm, separating multitudes of children from their main caregiver. Politicians scrambled for a legal solution for how to care for these "war orphans" and how to prevent such a trauma from happening again (Summers, 1991). In the meantime, counselors of all kinds and the family members left behind dealt with the daily grass-roots challenges of young children being separated from parents (Black, 1993).

Nothing much has changed since then, especially military deployments. In fact, they have been occurring more often, due to the war on terrorism. The following questions, then, are still relevant for the military family and the counselors to ask. How does separation affect a child's development when the deployments are short term (which usually means a constant in and out)? How is it affected when the deployments are long term (6-12 months before reunion)? How do a child's age, gender, and temperament interact as factors? How is a child affected when it is the dad that leaves? What if it is the mom? How does the remaining parent influence the child? What happens if both parents get deployed at the same time? This document will investigate possible answers to these questions.

Separations

The two most common stressors in military life have been frequent moves and family structure disruption caused by deployments. Family moves may be the most adverse for children between ages 6 and 15, due to their developmental focus on friends and personal plans (Ursano, Holloway, Jones, Rodriguez, & Belenky, 1989; citing Darhaer, 1976). The effects of separation from a parent, particularly the father, upon military children have been studied since World War II. These same stressors are now being noted and studied among civilian children who are subjected to frequent moving and divorce (Ursano, et al., 1989). Therefore, this research has considered both resources specifically about the military and works about children of divorce.

Both “repeated cyclical separations,” and life-threatening separations, especially long ones, “affect the psychological health and function of families and their members” (Busuttil & Busuttil, 2001, p. 208). How well a family deals with the separation will be determined in part by that family’s history. The coping behavior patterns used will in turn influence how well the reunion with and reintegration of the absent parent takes place (Busuttil & Busuttil, 2001).

In general, normal emotional reactions for children are anxiety, anger, sadness, resentment, and fear. This is true even when the family has had time to anticipate and prepare for the separation (Hunter, 1988; also see Black, 1993). According to Edna J. Hunter, a leading researcher on the effects of military separations on children, the following symptoms could be the result of regular military separations even though the research was done on children of Vietnam servicemen listed as prisoners of war (POW), missing in action (MIA), or killed in action (KIA). In descending order of frequency, the

emotional or behavioral problems reported are “unwarranted and frequent crying,” nightmares, rebelliousness, shyness, nailbiting, and “fear of the dark” (Hunter, p. 317). Busuttill & Busuttill (2001) continue this same list with “social and interpersonal problems,” including school behavior and difficulty with peers, behavior at home, and poor relations with the mother and other adults (p. 217; citing McCubbin, Hunter, and Dahl, 1975a).

Factors that influence these reactions are the child’s age, gender, “the level of individual and family functioning prior to the family disruption,” and the reactions to the separation of the parent who stays with the children. Also, the more life-threatening for the absent parent that the separation is, the more complex the affects become for the children (Hunter, 1988, p. 313; also see Black, 1993).

Hunter (1988) says that if there have been prior family problems, “children may show aggression, introversion, internalization of affect, helplessness, defensiveness, and impulsivity, all of which create strained relationships with parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and other adults (Gabower, 1960; Gonzalez, 1970; Hill, 1945; 1949; Kurlander, Leukel, Pavelvsky, & Kohn, 1961; Spjut & Studer, 1975; Stolz, 1952; 1954)” (p. 313).

Short-term (which usually means constant in and out)

Very little information was located regarding the effects of short-term military separations. This kind of separation includes assignments where the service member is gone for up to a month, for example, to attend some special school. In the Navy, this type of separation most often means the constant in and out of the ship and crew on cruises that can last from two to three days to three months, for the purposes of training, maintaining readiness, and preparing for the six-month deployment that occurs about

every 1_ years. It has been noted that the “psychiatric and behavioral problems of a ship’s crew and their families frequently correlate” with this type of separation (Ursano, et al., 1989, p. 1285). The military is not the only industry that deals with regular and frequent cyclical separations. Oil rig workers and commercial airline pilots are subject to this pattern as well. Busuttill and Busuttill recognize the research done on these two groups (e.g. Morrice & Taylor, 1978; Rigg & Cosgrove, 1992) and see parallels between the civilian and military families. These studies apparently focused on the husband and wife, for Busuttill and Busuttill make no reference to any discoveries regarding children. Still, these works are important here due to the very influential nature upon children of a wife’s reaction to her husband’s absence. His constant coming and going creates stress for her, and if she is stressed and dysfunctional, her children will be, too. The mother’s influence will be addressed in more detail later.

Long-term (6 months – 1 year before reunion)

Long-term military separations can be regular six-month cruises or unaccompanied tours that last for one year. Most of the research has been centered on the extremely long and hard separations of the POW/MIA/KIA families during the Vietnam War, but again, according to Hunter (1988) parallels can be seen in peacetime.

The long-range effect of extremely long and difficult separations on a child’s development is unclear. This is due to some conflicting study reports. The studies may also be incomplete, not having been carried on long enough. A five-year postwar study was the last one done on this group of POW/MIA children. Yet, post-traumatic stress may not reach its peak until 6 to 10 years after the event. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the parent does affect the children (Hunter, 1988). PTSD, especially delayed-

type PTSD, has the ability to tear apart a family even after it has successfully adjusted and reintegrated the returning member (Busuttil & Busuttil, 2001; citing Oboler, 1987). “Children may not only be secondarily traumatized by living with a PTSD sufferer, they may also be expected to live up to inappropriate ideals and goals which their parents have not been able to fulfill themselves as a result of the [trauma]” (Busuttil & Busuttil, p. 223). This, of course, is the extreme case.

Since the Vietnam War has been over for about 30 years, and the military has changed much since then, the research in some ways is outdated. More recently, Jensen, Lewis, and Xanakis (1986) (as cited by Ursano, et al., 1989) reviewed available data and concluded that military children, overall, were less psychopathological than the general population. This may be due to the more family-friendly orientation of today's military and the screening and dismissal of military members not found psychologically fit for duty. Also, modern family life and society have disintegrated some since the 1970's (Ursano, et al., 1989).

The Child

A child's age, gender, and temperament will influence how a child responds to a parent leaving. While none of these factors, either alone or together, is the most important determinant of a child's reaction, it is valuable to both parent and professional to know these details.

By Age

In 1989, Ursano and associates (citing Hunter & Nice, 1978) said that there were over 2 million children in military families, with 90% under the age of 13. The median

age was 5.3 years. Statistics from The Defense Manpower Data Center (1985) (as cited by Black, 1993, p. 277 & Table 2) appear to agree.

A child's developmental level "is related to but not completely governed by ... age;" it is about "psychological milestones" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p. 31). Wallerstein and Blakeslee go on to say that a child can get stuck in the developmental process

Because they're exhausted by what's happening at home. ... They're much too anxious and worried about [the parent], and their own future, ... [or] they're so angry ... [that they] sidetrack themselves from making important social, academic, and psychological achievements.

... Children usually regain their foothold in a matter of weeks or a couple of months. But if the delay continues for several months or years, children need help from parents, teachers, and other professionals to get them back on the appropriate [developmental ladder] rung as quickly as possible. (p. 32)

How children respond to separation will be discussed according to the age categories of Infants/Toddlers (0-3 years), Preschoolers (3-5 years), Early Elementary (6-8 years), Late Elementary (9-10 years), and Pre-/Early Adolescent (11-13 years).

Infants/Toddlers (0-3 years). Infants and toddlers have some very important things going on in their development, namely developing trust and attachment. In spite of unpredictable emotions, especially during the "terrible two's," this child needs "predictability, consistency, and routine" (Stahl, 2000, p. 56). When a parent leaves for a long time, "there is a loss which [the] child feels but cannot fully comprehend" (Stahl, p. 56). Since the child is largely non-verbal, frustration will be expressed through emotions

and behavior, such as regression and delays in development. There may be problems with eating, sleeping, and self-comforting. Irritability, depression, and withdrawal, as well as an increase in separation anxiety may manifest as the emotional expressions. Research indicates that children can tolerate being separated from a parent due to work and develop normally. “This will be affected by how much each parent has been directly involved in the child’s life” (Stahl, p. 57). Remember that “all of [the] child’s experiences in infancy and toddlerhood lay the foundation for what she thinks about people and for what she thinks about herself. The ambiance that [the parents] create around her deeply affects this process” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p. 45).

Preschoolers (3-5 years). The preschooler is developing friendships and thinking skills, learning how to cope with feelings, and finding everything to be fascinating. These children, though, are “at risk for fairly serious regression when they are afraid of losing one of their parents” (Stahl, 2000, p. 59). Some of the typical and, for a short period of time, somewhat normal symptoms include confusion, developmental delays and regression, irritability, clinginess, depression and withdrawal, more frequent or vivid nightmares, suffering self-confidence, increasing aggression and strange behaviors, worry over parents that leads to blaming self for the parent leaving, and fear of change that leads to trying to act perfectly (Stahl, 2000).

A typical preschooler believes that grown-ups control everything, creating a very secure place for the child, who confidently puts faith in them to provide for every need. Acute fear, then, is the natural first response when one of those adults leaves. A child at this age does not comprehend time or distance. “It takes children several years of development to understand that when someone disappears from view it doesn’t mean he

won't be back" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p. 51). The central fear is that if one parent can leave, then the other will leave too. Feelings of loneliness dominate. Incapable of understanding impersonal causes, but definitely aware of direct cause and effect, the 3-5 year old child assumes blame for the parent leaving. "Moreover, small children suffer more than older children do because they have so few ways to comfort themselves. They're too little to know how. ... He's totally dependent on the comforting he gets from [the parent]" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, p. 53).

School Age. There are some general descriptions that can be given about school aged children that bridges the three smaller age groups together. Structure and routine are what children between the ages of 6 and 12 thrive on. Fairness is a major value, so rules are very important. Pleasing the parents is also very important to them. A child in this age group will most likely relate differently with Mom than with Dad, going to him for some things and her for other things. When this child is struggling to cope with a parent leaving, some of the more severe reactions are "tantrums, regression, sleep problems, behavioral and academic problems in school, withdrawal or aggressions with peers, and depression. Some of these children are reluctant to grow up, and instead remain emotionally immature" (Stahl, 2000, p. 60). If the child has a strong relationship with the parent that is leaving, there may be feelings of abandonment if adequate contact isn't maintained (Stahl, 2000).

Early Elementary (6-8 years). More age specifically, the 6-8 year old is between two worlds: home and school. Attention is being shifted to playing with other kids. This age group understands cause and effect better and realizes that parents don't control everything. This child understands numbers and time but not geography, distance, or

space. Being laughed at is a major fear, but self-reliance is blossoming. The 6-8 year old needs the secure feeling that the family is stable and dependable. A separation at this time may cause the child to be pre-occupied with how the parents are doing during this family disruption. True separation anxiety is still a possibility at this age. Constantly thinking about this interferes with schoolwork, and negative feelings and their expressions can interfere with friendships. Problems have now compounded. The main place where this child will react will be at school. Any delays in schooling can usually be made up, except for reading skills. The strong emotion most likely to be generated by a separation is sadness, especially over how the parents are doing. This child may also blame himself for his parent leaving. Since children this age are still thinking in concrete terms, they are not capable of more complex and abstract logic for cause and effect (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p. 66).

Late Elementary (9-10 years). Nine and ten-year-olds are more capable of spending time alone, taking on more responsibility, and defining their personal interests. Some are even capable of doing creative things usually done by an older teenager or young adult, just not as long. Individualization is coming through in the ability to “think for themselves and distinguish their thinking from what other people believe” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p. 73). Impatience, criticalness, and even ridicule characterize the stage of skepticism this child is in. Adults will now have to earn any respect and affection given. Mental capacity now includes planning for the future, determining good and bad, as well as thinking about other moral issues. Morality is very important right now. Parental failures are devastating. Not only does this child want to spend more time with friends than parents, she may want to spend more time with

another adult that has some special skill she's interested in or trait she admires. "By the same token [the] child may disapprove or flatly reject other adults" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, p. 74). Family is still important, and the child feels comfortable and safe knowing that the family will continue on. Family activities that respect personal wishes and that sometimes include friends are especially enjoyed. Children at this age have developed a new sensitivity to how parents are feeling. Abstractions are easier to handle, and the reasoning behind behavior is starting to connect. A family disruption at this point will not create anxiety about who will meet their daily physical needs like it does in a toddler, but it will threaten their personal plans that have been based upon family stability (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

This rather self-centered orientation makes anger the most likely emotion to be expressed when a military separation is perceived negatively. Combined with the new mentality of morals, skepticism, and independent thinking, a 10-year-old easily vents his anger with criticisms and by passing judgments, and by being bossy. This unchecked anger could develop into petty theft, skipping school, and other mischievousness. This age group is especially good at dividing and conquering the parents (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

On the other hand, the increased sensitivity and the concern about the parents can stir up a great deal of compassion, even from boys. Sometimes these positive feelings are expressed with great bursts of passion (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

Pre-/Early Adolescent (11-13 years). A child between 11 and 13 seems excited by risk, yet he has very poor judgment and needs help controlling his urges. Even though a child may have a large vocabulary, she won't automatically talk about what upsets her.

“They show their unhappiness by making sudden changes in their behavior” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003, p. 36). Reactions to family disruptions from children in this age group can range from extremely flat to extremely demonstrative, such as running away. Usually, running away amounts to going over to a friend’s house maybe even for the night. “The lack of age-related symptoms in this group ... is not grounds for celebration. ... The risky behaviors you observe in these older children are a more serious challenge” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, p. 88). Remember this powerful assessment: “They’re ... capable of shielding their feelings from themselves as well as from you” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, p. 87). Being this close to adolescence, any fears of abandonment and loneliness can motivate this child to try growing up too fast. With a parent out of the house, the child might think that rules and constraints have been loosened, thus tempting her to try new and forbidden things. Children who are doing very well in school may react with virtually total denial that anything has changed. While prolonged denial is not a good choice, it is certainly the lesser evil between these two reactions. Children at this age really need their same-sex parent around to help them through this stage of development (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

By Gender

Based on Lifshitz’s work (1975) (as cited by Hunter, 1988), a conclusion can be drawn that a child’s development will be affected by the perception of his/her role in the family, especially when the child is of the same gender as the absent parent. As seen in observations of children of divorce, boys will react differently than girls when the father leaves.

Due to the earlier maturation, girls are more likely than boys to get into trouble during early adolescence. Girls of all ages will comfort themselves very often with fantasy, sometimes very elaborate and powerful ones. Such intense fantasizing and fantasizing past age 8 can indicate deeper troubles, according to Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003).

While his sister copes with the loss through fantasy, a boy is simply obsessed with his great need for his father. Boys are at greater risk than girls for academic problems. Boys may be trying to fill in the absent father's role when they put on their fathers' things and strut around the house. This behavior can be kindly discouraged or left alone, providing it does not get out of hand. Acting out in anger and ignoring schoolwork is more common among boys than girls (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Hall and Simmonds (1973) (as cited by Busuttill & Busuttill, 2001) observed some symptoms which were more common in males whose fathers were absent: "increased separation anxiety; role distortion; and sleep disorders, including nightmares. Destruction of property, acting out of rage toward the father, threats to leave home, excessive crying and fear of their mother's death were also reported" (p. 217).

By Temperament

According to Santrock (2004), temperament is "an individual's behavioral style and characteristic way of emotionally responding" (p. 210). Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003) say that temperament influences a child's development and is a "major influence on a child's response" to a family disruption (p. 34). A child with an easy temperament handles change with little difficulty and may even handle multiple changes, but beware of responses that are too calm. The child may be vigorously denying any feelings. They

will need attention eventually. The more demanding and difficult the temperament, the more likely the child will respond to the stress. Since no two children are alike, the parent and professional need to seriously consider the individual temperament (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

The Parent Who Leaves

Along with the previously mentioned factors of age/developmental stage, gender, and temperament, the parent-child relationship will influence how a child reacts to that parent's absence (Ursano, et al., 1989; citing both Baker, Cove, Fagen, et al., 1968, and Crumley & Blumenthal, 1973). Most studies have focused on a father's absence. The increasingly common absent mother has yet to be fully explored (Ursano, et al., 1989). Even more rare is the war-time scenario where both parents have been called to deploy. Resources for this area of research, then, are the professional writings and the newspaper and magazine coverage of Desert Storm/Shield where it focused on the parent issue. Greater detail will be found in the studies of father absence, but the basic reactions could be the same when the mother is absent.

Dad

The Center for Prisoner of War Studies, which were done from 1971 to 1978, studied the effects on children whose fathers were Vietnam POWs or listed as MIA or KIA. Even though such conditions were extreme, several correlations with regular military separations have been noted. Thus, the following conclusions from those studies should be valid. If a father's mental and emotional approach to leaving his family for duty is healthy and his deployment is not unduly long or extremely dangerous, he should return with little to no long-term adverse effects. In turn, his children should also have no

long-lasting problems. The work of Segal, Hunter, and Segal (1976) (as cited by Hunter, 1988) indicates that the worse it is for the father, the more adversely he can be affected. His state of being will influence his family. This negative influence will either be countered or compounded by whether quality support services are utilized, by how the wife handles any problems, and by the “children’s own basic personality vulnerabilities” (Hunter, p. 316).

Mom

Desert Shield/Storm got the nickname “Mom’s War” due to the significant number of women who participated. Melinda Beck (1990) (as cited by Blacksmith, 1992) reported that some mothers handled being separated from their children better than others. “A few U.S. servicewomen have torn up photos of their children; looking at them was just too hard” (p. 116). J.B. Elshtain (1991) (as cited by Blacksmith, 1992) reported that “mothers of young children and the children themselves suffered from serious stress and trauma at separation” (p. 136). The Gulf War saw about 16,300 single parents and 1,200 coupled military parents deployed. Some of the noted reactions include the children blaming themselves for the parent leaving; disruptive, aggressive and jittery behavior; sleeplessness; and additional traumatization for those children who had to move from familiar surroundings because no one was at home. The Army, who had more women deployed than any other branch, claimed it had no idea such problems would occur (Elshtain, 1991), despite the fact that the years of research, like those cited in this paper, identifies these very same kinds of reactions when fathers leave. This shows, then, that some responses in children are general regardless of which parent is absent.

Both

Other than the above mentioned statistic of how many married couples left children behind, nothing else was found that would shed light on this unique dilemma. Surely, it is a valid extrapolation to figure that the stress upon the child is at least double.

The Parent Who Stays

The single most important factor in how well a child handles being separated from a parent is how well the remaining parent handles the separation (Busuttill & Busuttill, 2001; citing both Hunter, 1988, and Ursano, et al., 1989). Please keep in mind that all the studies have been about father absence and the reaction of the mother, to whom a child is most likely to have stronger attachment bonding. Any studies about mother absence may come to a different conclusion.

The studies have revealed several factors that influence the mother's ability to cope well with the separation. These factors can be summarized into three categories: her attitude, her abilities, and her use of support.

Attitude

If the remaining parent's attitude is good about the separation, about the spouse and their marriage, and about the opportunity for some independence created by the separation, then the children will reap the benefits (Hunter, 1988; Ursano, et al., 1989). If the mental state is negative with "denial, depression, repression, rage and/or emotional apathy," the children will most likely "feel emotionally abandoned" (Hunter, p. 314). This leads the children to try to "regain the mother's attention through exaggerated regressive entertaining, or protective behaviors" (p. 314). "It should be recognized that grieving is part of the separation process, but that completion of the grieving process may

have detrimental effects for the family in the long-term” (Busuttil & Busuttil, 2001, p. 224). R. Hill (1949) (as cited by Busuttil & Busuttil) said that families who keep the husband/father in their minds handle reunion and integration better than those who “excluded the absent member after a period of working through their grief” (p. 212). This basically means living with some dysfunctional coping techniques during the separation, but it is better in the long run for the whole family (p. 224).

Abilities

The second category, abilities, includes the ability to handle the general stress caused by the separation, and the ability to keep the family organized and to manage the home (Hunter, 1988; Busuttil & Busuttil, 2001). “The wife’s ability to organize and run the family” has been identified as “the most important variable predicting psychological well-being of the family as a whole” (Busuttil & Busuttil, p. 213; citing Boss, 1976, 1977, 1980). If the house and family routine are falling into disarray, the children will notice this before they pick up on Mom’s insecurity; and mess and disorganization are stressful for everyone.

Use of Support

The third category, use of supports, includes the level of social interaction participated in during the separation, and even how well she relates to her own parents (Hunter, 1988). Children from stable living environments—particularly, a large supportive group of extended family nearby—will exhibit “less disorganized behavior” (p. 314). Morrice and Taylor (1978) (as cited by Busuttil & Busuttil, 2001) demonstrated that the Intermittent Husband Syndrome, a term they coined in their study of oil industry families, which consists of “anxiety, depression and sexual difficulties” in the wife, is

less likely to develop when “the levels of social support the family received during the husband’s absence” were good and strong (p. 210).

Conclusion

The overall question that this research paper tried to answer is: how does a military separation from a parent affect a child? Several factors were looked at. The most influential factor is the parent, more particularly the mother, who remains with the children. The way she handles the whole separation event has the power to influence how her children adjust to the family change.

The next most powerful factor is the child. Temperament seems to be the most important characteristic of a child in determining reaction. The child’s age or developmental stage is the next most important. Children at any age need their parents, but there are stages where they seem to be needed even more. Gender appears to play the least influence, contributing largely just to the way a child expresses his/her reaction. It certainly does not prevent a child from reacting just because the deployed parent is the same sex or not.

There was no evidence that the gender of the absent parent makes any difference to the child. The gender of the parent might have some influence on how the *parent* feels about being away from the children. The psychological health of the parent upon returning to the family does have influence, though.

The least influential factor appears to be the military deployment. This is actually very comforting news to the military family, for it is the one factor they have the least control over. This also testifies to the resiliency of the human race. No matter the job or the hardship or the family circumstances, people can healthfully adapt when properly

taught how and when they are truly willing to overcome and stay together no matter what.

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