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Article 19

Suddenly Military: Play-Based Interventions for Deployed National Guard and Reserve Families

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Deployment, a military fact of life, refers to the assignment of military personnel to temporary, unaccompanied tours of duty. Extended separations, increased workloads, shifting demands, erratic schedules, and combat make deployment a difficult, uncertain, and even harrowing experience for both service members and their families. In particular, the “suddenly military” National Guard and Reserve families find deployment to be especially stressful (Hoshmand & Hoshmand, 2007). These families must deal with an array of new and unexpected concerns, including legal, financial, marital, employment, child rearing, and health care issues as they rapidly transition to a military lifestyle. Moreover, they are often isolated and unable to access support services available to traditional military families (National Military Family Association [NMFA], 2006).

Since 2001, National Guard members and reservists have been deployed at an increasing rate (Global Security, 2007). Over half of them are married and 43% have children (Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, 2005). The children of deployed caregivers are at an increased risk for behavioral problems, academic difficulties, and emotional concerns (Kelley et al., 2001; Jensen, David, & Watanabe, 1996; NMFA, 2008). In spite of these stressors, many families prove to be resilient and successfully cope with the challenges of deployment. Play-based interventions can facilitate this process of resilience by focusing on the issues that families face at each phase of the deployment process.

Phases of Deployment

Distinct challenges confront families at each of three phases that comprise the entire deployment cycle (Amen, Jellen, Merves, & Lee, 1988; Horton, 2005). These

phases— pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment— reflect themes of preparation, separation, and homecoming/reunion (Pavlicin, 2003).

The pre-deployment phase begins with the warning order of deployment and ends with the service member's departure. During this stressful time, family members are struggling with the conflict of, on the one hand, an intense desire to remain close to the departing caregiver, and, on the other hand, a desire to distance themselves to protect themselves against the pain of separation. Family members are also dealing with the numerous practical chores involved in preparing for the separation. These tasks may include making major changes in housing, employment, child care, and schooling.

The second phase, deployment, lasts throughout the service member's actual separation from the family. Family members experience the gamut of emotional reactions, ranging from relief to fear, excitement to anguish, and hope to despair. The stressors involved in the day-to-day challenges of family life, such as shopping, driving children to activities, cleaning house, paying bills, and helping with homework, are even more difficult now that one important member is missing.

Post-deployment, beginning when the service member returns home and lasting three to six months, is an unexpectedly complicated phase for families. Family members fantasize the reunion for weeks before the homecoming and these high expectations often lead to disappointment. Reintegrating the deployed service member into the family's daily patterns and routines can be difficult to negotiate.

Attachment and Resilience

The concepts of attachment and resilience provide an essential foundation for play-based interventions with deployed families. Attachment theory and research have demonstrated that our lives are interwoven in an intricate tapestry of relationships that form, nurture, protect, enliven, and enrich us from birth to death (Ainsworth, 1985; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). The caregiver-child relationship, in particular, is crucial in fostering a sense of security across the lifespan. Deployment threatens to sabotage the safe haven that families can provide children (Budash, 2009), but play-based interventions can bolster the sense of security and help families to flourish under fire.

The second basic principle of play-based intervention is to recognize and value the resilience of children and families – to presume that they are survivors, not weak and passive victims of events (Echterling & Stewart, 2008b). Of course, families dealing with the crisis of deployment may feel overwhelmed and inadequate at times. It is important to remember that they also possess undiscovered strengths, overlooked talents, and unnoticed resources. As counselors, our task is to facilitate the emergence of the gifts that lie latent within them.

When we encounter families dealing with the crisis of deployment, we may feel tempted to be the knight in shining armor who rescues them from emotional turmoil. However, our job is more like the carpenter's assistant – helping children and their families to use the tools they may be overlooking – as they continue to build their lives. As children and families begin to experience their own sense of empowerment, recognize their untapped capabilities, and reconnect to sources of sustenance and nurturance, they build the scaffolding to successfully navigate deployment.

Therefore, the purpose of play-based crisis intervention is to promote resilience by supporting the potential for hope and resolve. By intervening at such a crucial turning point in the family's history, a seemingly small intervention can communicate a profound message of support. Four factors characterize family resilience in times of crisis: reaching out, making meaning, emotional regulation, and successful coping.

Reaching Out

Resilient families are not islands unto themselves. Reaching out (i.e., social support), offers deployed families many vitally important resources, such as affection, advice, affirmation, and practical assistance (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Community and social supports are resources that function as protective factors during military-induced separation (Wiens & Boss, 2006). Families that are better equipped to manage the stress of separation are those that meet with family support groups and other unit families, utilize military social services, and are involved with faith-based groups.

A survey conducted by the National Military Family Association revealed that less than 50% of the respondents reported a consistent level of family support throughout the phases of deployment (NMFA, 2006). Moreover, 17% of the respondents reported that no support was available. According to this survey, National Guard and Reserve families emphasized the need for additional information, including family support and community resources. Play-based, resilience-focused interventions (Echterling & Stewart, 2008a) help children and families connect with one another to find this support and to offer comfort and nurturance during the deployment cycle.

Making Meaning

When children and families are in crisis, they are also experiencing a crisis of meaning (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The play-based interventions use creative activities to enable children to tell their stories, affording them an opportunity to begin to gain cognitive mastery over the crisis and make important discoveries about possible resolutions. Children tell their stories in a variety of ways – talking, playing, drawing, sculpting, singing and writing – but whatever form their stories take, the process helps children to make meaning from the deployment.

Children and families not only tell their stories, but the themes that emerge from these stories eventually shape their own sense of personal identity and family legacy. In other words, the narratives that children and families create do more than organize their life experiences. They affirm fundamental beliefs, guide important decisions, and offer consolation and solace during deployment (Neimeyer, 2000). Creative activities can help children to transform their crisis narratives into survival stories.

Regulating Emotions

Resilient children and families regulate their emotions by reducing distress, soothing themselves when they are upset, enhancing feelings of resolve, and staying in the zone of positive emotional arousal (Echterling, Presbury, & McKee, 2005). Successful athletes talk of being in the zone when they are performing at their best. At these times, they're energized yet focused, emotionally charged yet poised. Children and families are more likely to survive troubled times if they are in this ideal state of emotional arousal. Play-based, creative interventions help children and their families to

take heart and manage their emotions productively.

A common assumption is that deployed families are experiencing only negative feelings, such as fear, sadness and stress. Recent research has demonstrated that families in crisis also experience feelings of resolve (Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, & Cacioppo, 2003). These emotions include courage, compassion, hope, peace, and joy. Acknowledging and giving expression to the full range of emotions – both negative and positive – can promote a positive crisis resolution (Stein, Folkman, Trabasso, & Richards, 1997). The play-based activities can help a child to regulate emotions by reducing distress and enhancing feelings of resolve.

Successful Coping

At least temporarily, a sudden deployment may rob children and families of their dreams for the future. Counselors can help them envision new possibilities by inviting them to create positive goals. Once articulated, goals serve as beacons that light the way for the resolution journey. Using play-based activities, children and families can continue the story of their lives. Once they see a future more clearly, survivors can gain a sense of direction and hope, become more motivated, and increase their momentum towards resolution. Studies have found that people who strive to attain positive goals have higher levels of well-being than those who try to avoid negative goals (Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998).

Interventions During the Pre-Deployment Phase

The play-based interventions we describe in this section can address the characteristic themes of the pre-deployment phase – themes of apprehension, fear of the unknown, uncertainty, and separation. The interventions include the *Art of Coping*, *Playing to Strengths*, and *Family Deployment Crest*.

Art of Coping

Many children spontaneously draw pictures that portray their fears, anguish and yearning throughout the entire cycle of deployment. In addition to providing children with opportunities to express their pain, counselors can also invite children to give expression to their resilience. Drawing pictures about their perseverance, resourcefulness, and creativity gives children an opportunity to recognize their own strengths and contributions. They can also use drawings to portray the help that others give them, the lessons they are learning from this ordeal, and the ways that they are becoming stronger.

The art may take many forms. For example, it could be a scene showing how they are helping their families, a depiction of something new that they have learned, a portrait of themselves as survivors, or an illustration of how they overcame an obstacle. Counselors may invite children to design posters showing what kids could do to prepare for deployment or what kids could tell themselves as they cope with separation.

When counselors have conversations with children about their art, they should empathize with the pain and be curious about the coping. In other words, they acknowledge the difficulties as they also ask questions that invite children to talk about their endurance, courage, compassion, joys, and hopes. Counselors can ask, for example, "I notice that this girl and her mama are smiling at each other in your picture. How are

they able to smile even though the daddy is gone?" Or they might wonder aloud, "What is this boy thinking as he helps fix dinner?" Such questions invite children to become more aware of the depth and richness of their own resilience.

Playing to Strengths

Many children act out their emotions, as well as demonstrate their resilience, through their play. Moreover, adult family members find play to be a wonderful opportunity to experience their own vitality and to savor the joys of life, in spite of the sorrows and hardships of deployment. Through play, children and families re-create themselves by expressing their feelings, enhancing their self-esteem, gaining self-control, and reinvigorating themselves. Play is one of the most powerful intervention tools for children and families throughout the deployment cycle.

Play offers several significant benefits. It can normalize reactions, invite children to try out new coping strategies, modify cognitive distortions, increase self-soothing, enrich relationships, enhance social support, and leave families with a sense of hope. Although counselors may not have the luxury of a well-stocked play therapy room when they work with military families, they can create a portable tote bag of toys and other materials for play-based intervention. They can assemble a variety of materials to help children express themselves through different forms of art, engage in nurturing and family life behaviors, play out fantasies, enact rescue operations, and give vent to aggressive feelings.

Family Deployment Crest

This activity can be done with one child, a group of children, or an entire family. With individuals or groups, counselors can invite them to work alone to create their own family deployment crests. When working with families, counselors can invite them all to collaborate in designing a single crest that they would share. See Figure 1 for an example of a blank template. One segment of the crest can be an animal that symbolizes family traits that are helping it through the challenges. Another section can display a flower, tree, or plant that represents the family's roots and potential for growth. A third part can show a symbol, such as a mountain or threatening scene, that portrays the deployment. Finally, the fourth portion of the crest can be a sign or symbol that expresses the family's hope for the future. Below the crest is a space for the family's motto, which summarizes one of the basic values of this family.

Interventions During the Deployment Phase

The play-based interventions that are particularly appropriate for this phase of the deployment cycle are *Survival Diaries*, *Helping Hands*, *Pocket Pals*, *Rituals and Routines*, *Blowing Bubbles*, and *Singing a Song of Resolve*. These activities provide children with opportunities to give and receive support, make meaning, manage emotions, and cope with the stresses of separation.

Survival Diaries

Many older children keep diaries or journals, finding satisfaction in the process of transforming their life experiences into words. During the deployment, counselors can invite children to give voice not only to their hardships but also to their stories of coping. They can elaborate on how they have been facing these challenges, managing the many changes in their lives, and making sense of what is happening. The theme here is that children are survivors who are showing determination, courage and compassion. As they continue to cope with deployment, children have the chance to mature and grow into adults who will thrive in their lives. As with any encounter with someone dealing with deployment, the counselor will want to leave the child on a positive note, feeling a greater sense of hope and resolve.

Pocket Pals

In this activity, children use a popsicle stick to create an image of their deployed loved one. They can draw a face, use yarn to make hair, design the person's clothes, and decorate it however they like. They can write a word or phrase on the back of the popsicle stick. The words can communicate hope or resolve or be a message to or from their deployed loved one.

Helping Hands

Counselors can easily adapt this intervention to use it with individuals, families, or even large groups. Offering each person a pencil and paper, invite children and family members to draw the outline of one of their hands. In each finger, they then can make a drawing or write the name of who or what has helped them through the deployment so far. The survivors can also make another Helping Hand to describe five ways that they have been a resource to others. With this activity, counselors invite children to explore how they have been making a positive difference during this difficult and painful time. It encourages them to bring into their consciousness that they are playing an active role in contributing to the family's response to deployment.

Rituals and Routines

Families, as well as broader systems, have many traditions that bring people together, affirm their collective identity, and celebrate their roots. Counselors can explore with military families the customs that offer structure, meaning, and connectivity to their lives. They can then help family members to be creative in designing new rituals and routines that preserve, as much as possible, the traditions while accommodating to the deployment. These experiences – whether they are special occasions, such as birthdays and holidays, or daily routines, such as greetings in the mornings and bedtime rituals – offer children and adults a sense of connectedness and normalcy.

Blowing Bubbles

Another breathing activity for emotional regulation can involve blowing bubbles, using commercial products, homemade materials, or even imaginary ones. Begin by asking the children what happens if they blow too hard when they're trying to blow bubbles. Then invite them to participate in the activity, either real or imagined, of softly,

slowly, and gently blowing air that creates a string of floating bubbles. Counselors may also want to encourage children to say one thing that helps them to keep their hopes afloat as they prepare to blow bubbles.

Singing a Song of Resolve

Children love to sing and one song appropriate for the deployment phase is a form of self-talk and reassurance that they can use to regulate their emotions by themselves (Shelby & Bond, 2005). To the tune of “Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star,” you can lead children in the following song:

I am safe and I am strong.
Take a breath and sing this song.
I am growing strong each day.
Everything will be okay.

When singing the words, “Take a breath,” the counselor can model slow, deep breathing by demonstrating it to the children. The counselor can also engage the children in acting out the other lines by making a muscle to show strength and giving the “thumbs up” signal for things being okay.

Interventions During the Post-Deployment Phase

The play-based interventions described in this section address the themes of the post-deployment phase – themes of reunion, reintegration, and adjustment to new family dynamics after deployment. The interventions include the *From My Heart To Your Heart*, *Balloons and Sheets* and *Out of the Ashes*.

From My Heart to Your Heart

This group activity (Bailey & Hartmann, 2002) is a playful and quick way to reconnect people to one another and promote a sense of the “new normal” after deployment. Children and family members begin by pairing up with one another. The counselor then demonstrates how they can encounter one another by acting out the words of the chant. The counselor starts this activity by announcing, “From my heart to your heart, I wish you well,” while pointing to one’s own heart and then pointing to the heart of one’s partner. Then the counselor goes on to other body parts, such as “From my elbow to your elbow, I wish you well,” while connecting to another person at the elbow. Respecting personal privacy, the counselor can facilitate a playful encounter among the participants by leading them through other connections – toe to toe, knee to knee, shoulder to shoulder, hand to hand, and ear to ear.

Balloons and Sheets

One way to help children and families in regulating their emotions during the post-deployment phase is to involve them in activities in which they use long, slow, deep breathing. For example, the counselor can give balloons to children and other family members, ask them to imagine a worry or concern they would like to blow into the balloons, and as they slowly exhale, they can allow the tension to flow into the expanding balloons. This activity combines the relaxing process of deep breathing with the imagery of externalizing a concern. Once children and family members have inflated their

balloons, they can then play with them however they like. They may want to toss them in the air, play catch with one another, or bounce the balloons.

When working with a group or family, the counselor can add another creative activity that involves a sheet. Gather the participants around a sheet spread on the floor. Invite them to place their balloons on the sheet, grasp the edge of the sheet and lift it as a group in order to carry these worries together. The group may want to work together to guide all the balloons to the center or one of the corners of the sheet. They can collaborate to raise and lower the sheet while they are walking in a circle. People enjoy shaking the sheet to toss their worry balloons into the air. At the end of the activity, some may decide to keep their balloons, exchange them with others. However, caution participants about popping balloons because the sudden loud sound, like the report of a firearm, can be startling.

Out of the Ashes

Counselors begin this activity by giving everyone a small piece of paper and a pencil. The participants then describe or draw a picture portraying the deployment experience. Then in a safe container, the counselor invites the participants to burn the slip of paper and roll the ashes into a piece of modeling clay. Using what they have learned and discovered in dealing with the deployment, the participants can mold a symbol of hope from the ashes and the clay.

Concluding Remarks

Since March 2003, Dr. Echterling and Dr. Stewart have collaborated with graduate students to provide play-based therapeutic services to the children and families of Virginia National Guard members who were activated for the war in Iraq and anti-terrorist activities in Afghanistan. As counselors, their mission was to bear witness to the commitment of these families to flourish under fire. Each month, the “suddenly military” families of mobilized troops have gathered to share a potluck dinner, met in a support group, and participated in expressive play activities that the faculty members and students facilitated. These children and families have demonstrated tremendous resilience, inspiring the authors and their students by their sacrifice, resolve, hope, compassion, and playful embrace of life, even during times of harrowing distress.

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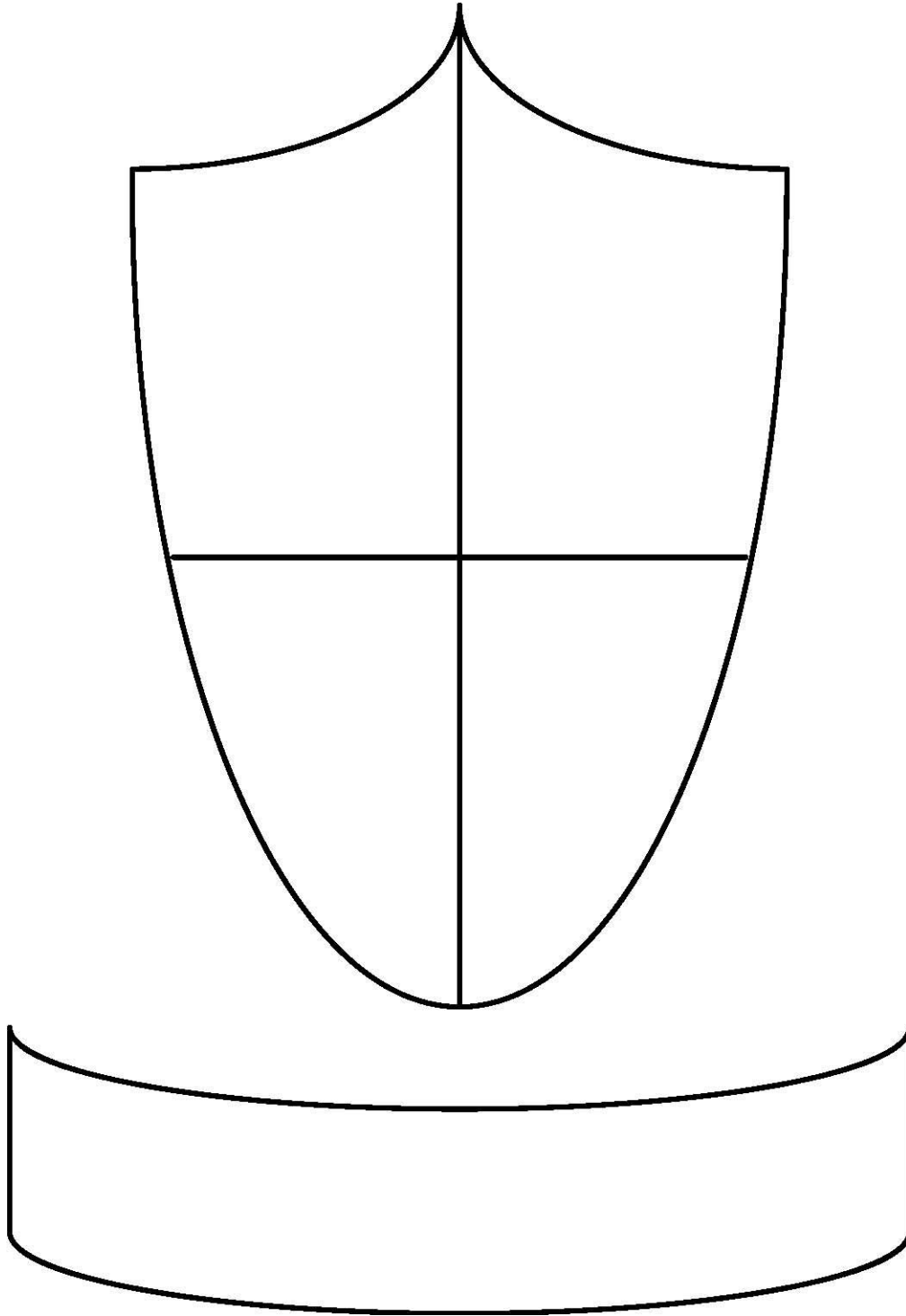


Figure 1. Template for Family Deployment Crest