More than two million children in the U.S. have had a parent deploy to Afghanistan or Iraq. When a parent goes to war - and often for years afterward - families are deeply affected. Young children are especially vulnerable, because they're physically and emotionally dependent on adults, and because their brain development can be disrupted by high levels of stress. When young children experience high levels of stress and trauma, the effects can continue well after their parents' military service ends, when their families may have less access to needed supports.

In *Home Front Alert: The Risks Facing Young Children in Military Families*, Child Trends examined the special circumstances characterizing the lives of children under age six in military families. From that research, we offer five reasons why young children in military families might be at risk:

1. **Deployment is stressful, even for the non-deployed**
   Parents who stay behind may experience depression, anxiety, and loss of financial and social support when their spouse or partner deploys. Getting and maintaining child care and health care (particularly mental health care) may be newly challenging. How well young children do under the circumstances of deployment can depend on how successfully the non-deployed parent (or other caregiver) copes with these burdens.

2. **Young children sometimes blame themselves**
   Young children have little ability to comprehend the facts surrounding their deployed parent's absence. They may feel responsible for causing the losses they experience, and develop emotional or behavioral problems. Children's reactions are greatly influenced by their age: preschoolers may become more "clingy" or otherwise regress in their behavior, and may openly express their
fears; toddlers may become more withdrawn or sad, or have more tantrums or sleep problems; babies may become listless or irritable, or stop eating. Among older children with a deployed parent, emotional or behavioral problems, anxiety symptoms, and academic difficulties may occur.

Cumulative stress can put children at risk
Excessive stress changes brain processes that regulate emotion and behavior, and can have other damaging health effects. The quality of relationships, particularly a young child’s attachment to his or her parents, can either buffer or magnify these negative effects. When stress on the non-deployed parent reaches overload, good parenting can suffer. Children are at greater risk for abuse or neglect when a parent is deployed. Longer deployments and multiple tours may be especially hard on families.

The end of deployment can bring new challenges
It can take time for a returning parent to reintegrate into family life. Young children may need time to get reacquainted with a parent who, in some cases, they don't remember. When returning military members have suffered significant injuries - physical or psychological - young children can react with fear and anxiety. Parental roles and styles of coping and survival adopted during the period of deployment need to be renegotiated. There is an increased risk for domestic violence under these circumstances. About one in six service members returning from deployment in Afghanistan or Iraq returns home with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and other serious mental disorders. This adds to the risks faced by their children and families.

The composition of the armed forces has changed, and the system is straining to meet its needs
The composition of America’s armed forces has changed in many ways - more mothers, more single parents, more National Guard and Reserves members. Mothers with minor children now make up about one in six members of the active-duty military. Children in dual-military families (about six percent of the total) can have their home lives completely overturned when the second parent is deployed; temporary caregivers, such as grandparents, may be poorly prepared for these new responsibilities. While the military has a child care system that has been the envy of the civilian world, the system currently strains to meet the need. With increased numbers of parents in the Guard or Reserves (now nearly half of the total force), many families don't have the supports, formal and informal, that come with living on base. Promising approaches for addressing the needs of today's military-connected families include home visiting models and better access to mental health services, including cognitive-behavioral therapy for preschoolers affected by trauma. Additionally, school personnel and other service providers would benefit from a deeper understanding of the challenges and strengths associated with military family life.
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