

From the CIPHER Knowledge Translation Team

Experiences of Children Growing Up With a Parent who has Military-Related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Qualitative Systematic Review

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Military personnel and Veterans are at an increased risk of developing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to the nature of their work. PTSD is characterized by the following symptoms:

1. Re-experiencing trauma via intrusion of memories.
2. An avoidance of trauma-related stimuli.
3. Negative alterations in cognitions and mood.
4. Negative alterations in arousal and reactivity.

When a child in a military family has a parent with PTSD, that child has increased risks of negative behavioral, psychological, biological, and social effects. These effects can have long-term repercussions into adulthood. The transmission of these effects from parent to child can be termed as intergenerational or secondary trauma.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

In this article, researchers describe their rigorous process to find, compile, and analyze all research articles written in English that included quotations about the experiences of children raised in a military family with a parent who has PTSD attributed to military service.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers found 12 studies to include in this review. The accepted articles focused on:

1. Families of military personnel who serve or have served in national armed forces that deploy to conflicts outside of their stationed country. Accepted experiences include engagement with political instability, armed civil conflict, and/or natural disasters for the purposes of peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, or war.
2. Children who are currently in or grew up in military families in domestically peaceful nations.
3. Children in families with one or more parents with a diagnosis of PTSD associated with military service.

All studies were published after 2006 and included military families in the United States, Canada, and Australia. The experiences of adults, adolescents, and children raised by a parent with a PTSD diagnosis, in addition to parents with a PTSD diagnosis, were included in this review. The findings were grouped to allow for identification of similarities among the results. A generalized statement was assigned to represent each group of findings.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

1. "Family climate: Parental PTSD creates a volatile and distressing climate within the family, eliciting a range of responses from children."
 - a. Family life revolves around containing and calming the parent with PTSD.
 - b. Meeting the demands of parenthood is difficult for adults with PTSD.
 - c. Children recognize their home life is dysfunctional and cannot manage effectively.



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KEYWORDS: Children, Intergenerational transmission of trauma, Military families, Posttraumatic stress disorder, Secondary traumatization

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2. “Family relations: Parental PTSD ripples through the family system, disrupting interpersonal communication and relationships during childhood.”

- a. Parental PTSD can cause emotional detachment and/or parental disengagement.
- b. The effects of military-related PTSD among fathers can alter the relationship between mothers and their children. Mothers can act as a positive influence for the children, model a rescuer role, or become detached and emotionally unavailable to their children.
- c. Parental PTSD can affect sibling relationships. Siblings may band together, struggle to connect, and/or become volatile with one another.

3. “Lasting effects: Children can experience emotional and psychological difficulties well into adulthood.”

- a. Parents' behaviors and stories can negatively affect well-being, social and intimate relationships, sleep habits, and school performance.
- b. Children can experience a complex array of negative emotions towards their parents.
- c. Feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy can last into adulthood.
- d. Mental health disorders beginning in childhood can persist into adulthood.

4. “Pathways forward: Making sense of it all and moving beyond parental PTSD can take significant time, energy, and support.”

- a. Children are able to recognize and change harmful behaviors that can break the cycle of intergenerational trauma.
- b. Learning about PTSD in adulthood can allow children to revisit memories with a fresh perspective. This perspective can help reframe their experiences, allowing for compassion, acceptance, and forgiveness.
- c. Adult children who find compassion for themselves and family members usually become accepting and forgiving towards themselves and their family members.

WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH MEAN?

1. We must develop more effective methods of communicating with children about traumatic events and PTSD.
2. Family units should be included in the PTSD recovery process. Only treating the family member with PTSD is not sufficient for an effective recovery.
3. To best understand the experiences of children, research needs to represent the voices of children during childhood, rather than rely on retrospectives from adult children or proxy reports from their parents.



CITATION

Cramm, H., Godfrey, C. M., Murphy, S., McKeown, S., & Dekel, R. (2022). Experiences of children growing up with a parent who has military-related post-traumatic stress disorder: a qualitative systematic review. *JBI Evidence Synthesis*, 20(7), 1638–1740. <https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-20-00229>

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