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**Strong Families Strong Forces**
**By Lindsey Getz**
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In 2008, the Boston University School of Social Work (BUSSW) received a four-year grant from the U.S. Department of Defense to fund a program that would help support the healthy reintegration of soldiers from Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom into their families. As the school wraps up its final year of funding for Strong Families Strong Forces (SFSF), it says the effort has been a tremendous learning experience for everyone involved.

With approximately 43% of active duty and select reserve troops being parents, BUSSW researchers were concerned about how very young children of military families handled separation and reintegration. Of the roughly 2 million children who have experienced the deployment of at least one parent, about 42% were younger than 5 years old during the deployment period.

While there are various programs designed to help military members and their families regarding readjustment, Ellen DeVoe, PhD, the project’s principal investigator, says assistance for families of young children is lacking. “There aren’t a lot of resources available, particularly in New England where we don’t have a lot of bases,” she says. “It’s common for these families to feel very isolated in their own communities, especially if they’re not near other military families. And even if there are community services available, they might not know how to work with a military family.”

But the need for support is critical. “We know from the literature that prolonged separation from a parent—including deployment-related separation—can constitute a developmental crisis for children in this [under age 5] age range,” adds Abby Ross, MSW, MPH, project director of SFSF and a BUSSW doctoral student.

When starting out, one fear the researchers had was that participants might not come forward because there has been some stigma associated with asking for help. Fortunately, that wasn’t the case with this project. “I think the culture of the military is shifting, and it is becoming more acceptable for service members to acknowledge any struggles they might encounter returning from deployment,” notes Ellen Maynard, LCSW, EdM, a research assistant/enrollment coordinator with the project. “Families were willing to be involved in our program for several reasons. For one, our primary focus is on the young children in the family, and service members are like any parents and are open to services for their children. I also think many families participated because they understood their participation in this program could serve families in the future. Military families are very service oriented.”

**A Community-Based Approach**
Employing a community-based participatory approach in three phases, the SFSF initiative began with an exploratory study phase. Phase 1 conducted an extensive exploratory study via qualitative interviews with 80 service members and/or their spouses who are parents of young children. “During this assessment period, we wanted to find out directly from the parents what’s involved with parenting through deployment,” DeVoe says. “The cycle of deployment is how the military describes these transitions. There’s the predeployment period, when the military member gets their orders and is getting ready to deploy. The family is figuring out how they are going to handle these changes. Then there’s the actual deployment. Many spouses at home said they felt like a single parent at this stage. Finally there’s redeployment, when they learn they’re coming home. This is the reunion period, but it brings on more parenting challenges of its own.”

During phase 2, a pilot of SFSF was conducted with nine families. This home-based reintegration work focused on families with young children (birth to 5 years old) and their needs during the deployment cycle. Now in the third and final phase of the work, DeVoe and her fellow investigators have nearly completed the randomized clinical trial and have closed enrollment. Approximately 128 families have participated with only one dropout due to scheduling conflicts.

In the third phase, two family specialists meet with various configurations of family members during the eight weekly sessions/modules, lasting approximately one to 11/4 hours. The SFSF program modules are “Your Child & You,” “Becoming a Military Family,” “Your Deployment Cycle,” “Your Child’s Deployment Experience,” “Catching Up With Your Child,” “Catching Up With Yourself & Your Partner,” “Parenting and Co-Parenting,” and “Saying Goodbye and Moving Forward.”

Though the modules are named, DeVoe says they are meant to work only as a guideline and are purposely flexible, as some families may need more guidance in certain areas than others. “Our visits consist of a mix of conversation and activity—some with the whole family, some just the service members and spouse/partner, and some just focused on the kids,” Maynard adds.

**Shedding Some Light**
Several critical issues have already been brought to light in working with these families. DeVoe says a key priority has been getting military members to understand what issues they have “brought home” and how those are affecting their relationship with the family. “Military members come home with any number of issues, including posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD], anxiety, and even injury,” DeVoe says. “In contrast to other parenting programs, we are not behaviorally focused. Our focus is on parental reflective capacity, as we want the parents to be able to identify and monitor their own actions and emotions.”

DeVoe says the program has a wide range of families and about one-half of them are struggling with the service member’s PTSD symptoms. While some have gotten into treatment, others are still trying to figure things out. Either way, DeVoe says these families need a lot of attention, as family life and parenting can lead to triggers for PTSD symptoms.

“We worked with one family where the father knew he had PTSD,” DeVoe recalls. “The 2-year-old son would like to sneak up on him and say ‘Boo!’ or surprise him, and the father would literally take him down. So we try to help families identify what might be triggering the symptoms in their environment and how to reconcile some of the concerns.”

Many families also are typically dealing with a “restructuring” of the family structure once the military member returns home. The roles of “who does what” need to be figured out all over again, as a spouse may have gotten used to handling certain roles while the military member was away. “It can be a serious renegotiation from a systems perspective,” DeVoe says.

**A Lot Learned**
The researchers say they’ve learned an incredible amount of information from the project. “I’ve learned that the military is diverse and each family has a unique experience of military service and deployment, which is what we call the ‘military cultural identity.’ It is important to honor and respect this diversity,” Ross says, also noting that the project experience has been “amazing.”

Ross also says she’s learned how resilient these families are, and she’s realized that military-civilian partnerships are critical to a successful program. “Our partnership with the military community maximizes the relevance, feasibility, and long-term sustainability of the SFSF program,” she says.

It’s also become obvious that a universal phenomenon following deployment is change. Deployment changes everyone in the family in some way, and families must learn to live with these changes. DeVoe says even in a relatively peaceful deployment, the experience still changes everyone.

“We have learned that deployment is incredibly difficult, even for strong families. It’s an area deserving of attention.”

*— Lindsey Getz is a Royersford, PA-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to****Social Work Today****.*