Resilience Building Among Adolescents From National Guard Families: Applying a Developmental Contextual Model

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Abstract
A better understanding of resilience building in military-connected children is needed to serve the needs of military families and sustain the security of the United States. This study explored the development of resilience in 30 adolescents from National Guard families that had been deployed. Using thematic analysis, we found that military-connected adolescents are affected by events in settings far beyond their control—political and civil upheavals in foreign lands, military cultural values, societal perception of the military and of wars, and communities’ responses to military families. When comfort was not offered by familiar social and school networks, these adolescents had only their families to which they could turn. The extent to which adolescents can depend on parents for comfort was influenced by the quality of the parental relationship. Even when parents were available, adolescents were inclined to uphold the military value of personal courage and withdraw to self-soothe.

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The Global War on Terrorism has required an unprecedented usage of the U.S. Reserve and National Guard which has placed new demands on these military families. Between 2001 and 2007, the Department of Defense reported mobilizing over 575,000 reservists and guards to Iraq and Afghanistan; the greatest number since World War II (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2006). Reserve and Guard members and their families are especially vulnerable to deployment stress because long deployments were not common and seldom anticipated prior to this war. The duration and frequency of these deployments have the potential to disrupt the lives of military families, especially military-connected children (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2010).

**The Effect of Deployment on Military Children**

A review of studies on the effects of deployment on military-connected children in general found higher stress, and emotional and behavioral difficulties among military adolescents compared with civilian counterparts (White, De Burgh, Fear, & Iversen, 2011). Another review noted that the association between deployment and maladjustment was strongest in middle childhood, but weakest in adolescence (Card et al., 2011). The capability of the non-deployed parent is one important factor that contributes to children’s well-being (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2010). Parents’ high stress levels and poor mental health have been positively associated with children’s emotional difficulties (Al-Turkait & Ohaeri, 2008; Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2010).

**Children of Army Reserve and National Guard Soldiers**

National Guard and Army Reserve families’ lives are filled with unique challenges different from their civilian counterparts by whom they are surrounded (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003) as well as from families and children of Active duty personnel. National Guards and Reserves typically do not live on or near military bases, are not as familiar with the availability of military support, and can feel isolated from the military community (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Gorman, Blow, Ames, & Reed, 2011).
Children of Reserve and Guard soldiers are generally less familiar with combat deployment, especially if their parents were never Active-Duty personnel. The emotional health of children of Reserve and Guard soldiers may also be more strained given that spouses of Reserve soldiers report poorer emotional well-being compared with spouses of Active-Duty soldiers (Chandra et al., 2011).

**Adolescents Developing Resilience**

Despite the added stress on children of Reserve and Guard soldiers, research has found low rates of maladjustment among adolescents (Card et al., 2011), which reflects their resilience. Resilience refers to “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances” (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 426). Factors that contribute to children’s resilience include individual (flexibility and fortitude), family (cohesion and encouragement), and social-environmental (supportive peers and communities) features (e.g., Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003) that interact with each other.

Parents in particular play a central role in children’s resilience. Parents can be a resource by nurturing resilience through role-modeling and positive care-giving as well as a protector by buffering children from the effects of environmental adversities (e.g., R. Gilligan, 2001). Peer relationships and acceptance, and school can protect against environmental as well as familial adversities (e.g., Bukowski, 2003). Community-based activities can contribute to children’s developing self-efficacy and self-esteem (e.g., R. Gilligan, 2001). The inter-relatedness of the family, peer, school, and community systems is depicted in Lerner and Castellino’s (2002) Developmental Contextual Model of Adolescent-Context Relations. This model builds partly on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and other theoretical work in psychology and evolutionary biology (e.g., Gottlieb, 1991). Developmental contextualism recognizes the interdependence of changes across organizations relevant to adolescents (Lerner, 1996). Lerner and Castellino’s model accounts for the adolescents’ relations with parents, siblings, peers, teachers, other students, extended families, parents’ relations as spouses and workers (e.g., military service member), and the community. These relational associations affirm that adolescent development is systemic and influenced by the experiences and roles of others.

Lerner and Castellino’s (2002) model also illustrates the dynamic, temporal nature of development. The process of adolescent development involves the changing relationships between the developing adolescent and
the dynamics in his/her immediate context (e.g., family and peer group dynamics) which in turn is embedded within a particular community, society, and culture (Lerner, 1991). The reciprocity of relationship between the various levels of organizations contributes to the dynamic feature of adolescent development. In order to better understand the development of resilience in adolescents, it would be important to recognize the dynamic and complex nature of adolescent-context relations and how these relationships vary across time. In this study, Lerner and Castellino’s (2002) Model is used to understand how adolescents from National Guard families experience parental deployment and build resilience. The goal is to better understand adolescents’ resilience in response to deployment while recognizing their stages of development and how those stages intersect with military life.

Majority of the literature on resilience in families and adolescents has applied the concept of resilience rather than tapping into what helps overcome stresses and experiences and develop strengths to face future challenges (Hill, Stafford, Seaman, Ross, & Daniel, 2007). Most studies on adolescent resilience (e.g., Cozza, Chun, & Polo, 2005; Weber & Weber, 2005) have not explored military-connected adolescents or have done so using focus groups (e.g., Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007) that can prevent participants from sharing in-depth personal experiences. This study used one-on-one personal interviews to foster in-depth sharing and provide adolescents a platform for power and voice.

**Development Contextual Model and Resilience**

A parent deploying to a theater of battle can be a source of distress for military families. However, the process of recovering from such stress can present families an opportunity for growth and resilience (MacDermid, Samper, Schwarz, Nishida, & Nyaronga, 2008). Resilient families access strength-based processes in their committed and caring relationships to overcome adversity which can strengthen these families (Walsh, 2006). Lerner and Castellino’s Development Contextual Model informs us that an adolescent’s caring relationships first includes parents, followed by extended family, and then peers and schoolmates/teachers. The extent to which an adolescent can benefit from these relationships partially depends on how the adolescent and the parents, peers, or teachers respond to adversity.

Studies have found that non-deployed parents play a crucial role in how adolescents experience parental deployment. Research suggests that perceived maternal support is related to less symptomatology overall, for both male and female adolescents (Morris & Age, 2009). As such, maternal support can be an important protective factor against negative outcomes.
commonly presented by military adolescents. Likewise, the non-deployed parents’ attitudes and responses to deployment can also impact adolescents’ experiences of parental deployment (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, & Richardson, 2010). Previous research with military-connected adolescents found that adolescents who were aware of changes in their non-deployed parent (mainly related to symptoms of depression), also reported that these changes increased conflict, arguments, and emotional intensity in the adolescent-parent relationship (Huebner et al., 2007).

Similarly, changes in the deployed parents’ roles and accessibility has implications for adolescents’ development. Although deployed parents are not physically present, hence unable to fulfill their typical family-related responsibilities, their psychological presence can lead to role ambiguity during deployment (Faber et al., 2008). In response, it is common for non-deployed parents and adolescents to temporarily assume the roles of deployed parents, the act of which can contribute to the adolescents’ increased independence and resilience (Huebner et al., 2007).

As resilience builds, families are better able to rebound from adversity and become more resourceful (Walsh, 2006). Resilient families can successfully fulfill their functions by providing membership, economic support, protection, nurturance, education, and socialization (Patterson, 2002). How family members perceive stressful situations or crises is influenced by families’ histories of adaptation to previous challenges. Thus, the potential intensity of military families’ challenges during future deployments is influenced by how they coped with previous deployments, and how effective they perceived those coping efforts to be.

In addition to receiving support from family members, children can benefit during deployment by interacting with those outside the immediate family. Research suggests that the connections with friends, school personnel, and community are protective factors that can enhance resilience in adolescents from military families (e.g., Morris & Age, 2009).

Lerner and Castellino’s model highlights the relationship between the adolescent and parental work network which for military service members is characterized by long parental work hours, multiple changes of station, and deployments which can be dangerous (MacDermid et al., 2008). Change across time, noted by Lerner and Castellino, is especially salient when considering how military families respond to parental deployments. These changes may be normative for military adolescents and can help them cope with future relocations and changes in military orders. As military adolescents become more familiar with deployment-related changes and adversity, this familiarity may help them to naturally develop coping strategies which can reduce the potentially negative impacts of
deployment (MacDermid et al., 2008). Compared with military families experiencing deployment for the first time, those families with multiple successful deployments may cope better and present with more resilience—yet depending on their previous coping success, multiple deployments can also lead to stress accumulation (MacDermid et al., 2008) which impedes the development of resilience.

Aspects of Lerner and Castellino’s model that have yet to be studied in depth are the adolescents’ deployment experience in relation to their communities, culture, and society at large. If the adolescents and/or military family have internalized the Army’s seven core cultural values—loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage (Rush, 2006)—these values may impact the adolescents’ interaction with their various contexts. For example, older adolescents may find motivation to fill new family roles during deployment, because they are loyal to their families and want to model selfless service to their younger siblings as they fulfill their duties as the eldest siblings. Adolescents may also feel compelled to not display any negative emotions when a parent is deployed—an act that takes personal courage. While this courage is admirable, these adolescents are at risk of feeling isolated and alone. Adolescents’ desire to remain loyal to their family and the Army could further contribute to keeping silent any displeasure with rules and expectations.

**The Current Study**

The voices of adolescents have often been ignored by researchers (e.g., Arnett, 2005). To gain insight into a subjective world that we do not yet fully understand—the military-connected adolescent world—it is imperative that we listen to their uncensored stories. This approach gives power and voice to a group that has only recently been a focus of researchers (e.g., Huebner et al., 2007). In this study, we apply Lerner and Castellino’s model to better understand the lived experiences of military-connected adolescents and to identify the challenges they face and the factors that foster their resilience during parental deployments. Our overarching research questions were as follows:

**Research Question 1:** How do children of National Guard families experience parental deployment?

**Research Question 2:** What contributes to the well-being and resilience of children of National Guard families?
Method

Guided by phenomenology, this study describes the meaning and essence of the lived experiences of children of National Guard families. Such an approach allows us to understand the essence of these phenomena as they were experienced (Kvale, 1996). Our goal was to gather participants’ stories until they became repetitive and any new information did not necessarily add more to the overall story—known as the point of saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants and Data Collection

Participants of an Operation Military Kids’ Summer Camp program who had a deployed parent were invited to voluntarily participate in this study. The camp was offered through the Research and Extension arm of a Midwestern university and was specifically programmed for adolescent children of National Guard service members. Invitation to participate in this study and information about this study, along with consent forms, were sent to camp participants and their parents prior to attending the camp. No monetary incentives were provided to participants.

Thirty-six adolescents volunteered participation and returned parental consent forms. Interview data from 6 adolescents were incomplete due to either recording error, the parent had never been deployed, or was deployed before the adolescent was born. This study included data from 30 adolescents aged 12 to 17 years old (M = 14.45; SD = 1.30). Four adolescents were male and 16 were female, of which 26 identified as White, 3 as mixed race, and 1 did not reveal race. Of the 28 adolescents who shared information regarding family structures, 23 lived with two biological parents, 1 with adoptive parents, and 4 with stepfamilies. Three adolescents had parents deployed at the time of this interview. Parents of the other 27 adolescents had returned from deployment within the last 2 to 84 months (M = 33.83; SD = 27.52). The ages of the adolescents at the time of the most recent deployment ranged from 9 to 16 years (M = 12.33; SD = 2.13). Ten adolescents could not recall the number of parental deployments. Of those who could recall, deployments ranged from 1 to 8 (M = 2.25; SD = 1.89).

Data were collected at the second day of the week-long camp. To prepare participants for the interviews, participants were first invited to engage in a brief mindfulness exercise where they recalled the time when their parents were deployed. Immediately afterward, participants were asked to draw their experiences of deployment. Both exercises were intended to ease participants’ recollections of their deployment experiences. Participants were then
interviewed individually for 20 to 40 minutes by a research team member using an interview guide. Interview questions were developed by the principal investigators and piloted with a military family prior to this study. Sample questions were: “How did you make it through your parent’s deployment? What or who helped?” and “What changes did you see in yourself when your parent returned from deployment?” Participants further completed demographic information that asked if they experienced increased difficulties in 11 areas of their lives—with school work, friends and neighbors, immediate family, other relatives, health problems, mood problems, drug use, alcohol use, behavior problems in school and at home, and internet use. Participants rated the above areas from 1 (no increased difficulty) to 4 (increased difficulty). Overall mean score averaged 1.64 (SD = 0.69) indicating that participants experienced minimal increase in difficulties in the areas above.

Participants were encouraged to consult with the camp counselors if they had questions or needed to debrief the interview process. Camp counselors were available for consultation throughout the duration of the camp. The primary investigators were in contact with the camp administrator post data collection to ensure that participants who needed consultation received it. Parents were also informed to contact the camp administrator or primary investigators as needed. No parents contacted the camp administrator or primary investigators post data collection.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. Transcripts were analyzed by a team of 12 researchers (professors, graduate and undergraduate students), most of whom were also involved in collecting the data. Thematic analysis was used to identify overarching themes that reflected the experience of deployment (Boyatzis, 1998). Three groups of four members (including a faculty conversant in qualitative analysis who led their respective groups) each met weekly for 2 months to complete the analysis. The use of multiple analysts contributed to the confirmability and dependability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

At the first meeting, all researchers independently performed initial coding of the same interview transcript by identifying concepts and their properties, and capturing them in words or phrases that served as labels for sections of the data. Researchers then met in their respective groups to discuss findings and collectively engaged in focused coding to identify patterns and overarching themes. This was followed by a meeting of the three group leaders who shared and compared the findings of their teams. Given that the groups
found similar patterns and themes in this first transcript, the 30 transcripts were divided equally between the three groups for analysis.

After every transcript was analyzed, groups would meet to compare and contrast findings to delineate and extricate relationships between concepts that formed the axis of themes derived from the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Related concepts were combined to form sub-themes within larger themes. This process was performed with subsequent transcripts, where themes were triangulated—compared and contrasted across transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)—to help ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was further improved by including detailed narratives in the findings. Confirmability was also ensured by keeping an audit trail of the themes so as to enable tracing the themes back to the data. The themes that emerged from this reduction and clustering of concepts formed a comprehensive picture of the participants’ collective experiences. In analyzing the transcripts, close attention was paid to the language used to describe experiences, the issues raised, and the importance attributed to specific issues.

One member in each group utilized C. Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch’s (2003) Listening Guide to write memos and develop I-poems to capture participants’ complex and multilayered expressions of their experiences. The process entailed identifying the pronoun “I” with the descriptive phrase behind it. These were then put in stanzas like the lines from a poem. The sequence in which these expressions appeared in the interview transcript was maintained. Creating I-poems allowed us to closely listen to the voice of each participant and better understand their experiences. Saturation within the data became apparent after about 20 transcripts were analyzed. After all transcripts were completely analyzed, all team members met together to compare, contrast, and explore relationships among emergent themes.

**Findings**

Our analysis found five overarching themes illustrated below—self-reliance, family life, friends and school, community connection, and society and media—that captured the essence of adolescents’ experiences during deployment. Pseudonyms were used to effectively portray the stories of these adolescents and to maintain confidentiality.

**Self-Reliance**

Deployment left a lasting and unfavorable impression on the adolescents. The need to be strong and self-sufficient was a major theme and contributed
to adolescents’ feeling more grown up compared with their peers. Sub-themes include aloneness and maturation.

**Aloneness.** Adolescents spent a considerable time alone doing art and listening to music to distract themselves from the stress of deployment—“Yeah, I just sketched and wrote poetry (Chelsea, age 16, female).” It was during these times of solitude that adolescents reflected upon their experience, as further explained by Chelsea:

> Mostly I just felt kind of, alone a lot of the time. And I felt like I had to grow up really fast because I had to take care of my family . . . Uh, I just kind of grew up a lot. And, I . . . kind of became secluded sometimes.

Older adolescents spent time outside their homes with friends, while younger adolescents such as Elizabeth (age 14, female) sought sanctuary in their bedrooms—“Sleeping. Just sleeping through it . . . It was kind of easy to ignore, to put aside, so I did that the best that I could.” Julia (age 15, female) shared that when she was 5 years of age, she would retreat to her fenced-in backyard to escape the confusion of having a distraught mother with a newborn baby and a father who was not around. The yard served as a safe haven—just enough separation from the stress, but not completely cut off. Julia’s I-poem speaks for itself:

> I got really quiet
> I couldn’t stay in the house
> Like I would go outside a lot
> I wouldn’t necessarily leave the yard much
> I just didn’t want to be inside
> I couldn’t stay in the house
> I felt confused

Adolescents’ artistic depictions of their deployment experiences, as well as their explanations and interpretations of those drawings, were often charged with raw emotions. Many drawings featured dark clouds, rain, and gloominess which adolescents described as worry, sadness, and anxiety. For example, Debbie (age 15, female) drew a black house and tearfully described
the deployment as “. . . an empty house . . . like it was not home anymore, you know? Like, it just, like it didn’t feel right being there. [Be]cause it was not like we were all there.”

Lisa (age 14, female), who divided her drawing into two sections, explained, “One side is calm and happy and excited to just do things with my mom and my dad. And then the other just, really, really, really sad. Yeah, and guilty, and things that I . . . that I did” referring to the things that she got to do that her deployed parent did not. For three participants, deployment represented a time when their parents divorced. Deployment naturally became exceptionally stressful as depicted in Lisa’s I-poem:

I saw like

I said everything went downhill

I did things

I never thought

I would do

I got like really depressed

I don’t know

I got like

I got like so depressed

I like started cutting myself

I said

I never thought

I would do

The recollection of their deployment experiences brought forth emotions—sadness, loneliness, anger, confusion—that had been buried for as long as 10 years for some adolescents. These emotions arose from having to make sense of deployment on their own. Julia (age 15, female) recalled her reaction to having yellow ribbons tied to a tree outside her house when she was 5 years old:
I remember when

I was really little

my friends would come over and ask

about the ribbons and

I would get really upset

I couldn’t quite understand

why he had left

why we were putting the ribbons in the trees

My mom had tried to explain it to me but

I couldn’t get her past

I couldn’t get her past “Daddy’s gone”

Why did he leave?

When’s he coming back?

Why is mom so upset?

I remember my mom

I remember my mom telling me

Maturation. There was awareness that deployment caused a change in roles and perspectives. Adolescents indicated that deployment contributed to feeling more grown up, as captured in Chelsea’s (age 16, female) I-poem:

I just felt kind of

I felt like

I had to grow up really fast

I had to take care of my family
Maturation was also evident in the abilities to reflect upon and appreciate the journeys of personal growth during deployment. The ability to recognize that, under the circumstances, non-deployed parents did the best they could was another sign of maturity. Because most adolescents appeared more mature than their chronological ages, the outliers were the adolescents who appeared to be developmentally on par with their age. Overall, deployment seemed to accelerate adolescents’ maturation, yet this could come at the expense of seeking emotional comfort and support or the space to express developmentally acceptable behaviors.

**Family Life**

How the families supported the adolescents was another major theme. When support was not rendered by friends/peers and school, adolescents turned to their families. While the increased concern for the well-being of family members led adolescents to assume more adult roles in their families, adolescents also sought support from their families—which was not always reciprocated. Sub-themes included worry, conflicting emotions, parentification and added responsibilities, multiple losses, family support, and family pride.

**Worry.** Being concerned for the safety of their deployed parents was prevalent. To manage their worries, older adolescents would take the opportunity to learn what was happening in the country where their parents were deployed. However, the information they learned often increased their worries. A keen awareness of the well-being of the non-deployed parent, although not as prevalent, was notable. John (age 14, male) described his non-deployed parent’s experience as a “struggle.” John, whose father was deployed, described his mother as “... paranoid, like, frustrated” and quickly justified it as “I am pretty sure she (mom) missed him (dad).” Similar types of justifications for non-deployed parental challenges were common.

Adolescents’ worries extended to themselves. Many felt that their safety and well-being were jeopardized when their father, the “protector,” was deployed. Kale (age 13, male) shared how his concern for safety led him to be more vigilant during deployment, “I’ve become a lot more like more aware of my surroundings.” The return of the deployed parent often alleviated this distress and only a couple of (male) adolescents felt that it was their responsibility to protect their families during deployment.

Worry was often accompanied by silent sadness (Andrew, age 14, male):

... there was all sorts of stories about bombs
Like bombs and attacks . . . and

I was worried that he wouldn’t come home

I couldn’t sleep most of the time . . .

I just don’t share

I am thinking

I’m not as outgoing

I used to be

I spend more time by myself

It’s just life

**Conflicting emotions.** Having conflicting emotions was common during deployments. There were strong emotions over the both the absence and presence of the deployed parent, and new responsibilities assumed during deployment that often caused confusion. For example, many adolescents felt torn between feeling concern for their deployed parents and feeling guilty when having a good time with their families during deployment. This confusion was described as “weird” by Elizabeth (age 14, female):

I guess like, since things have really changed, then like, it was weird, like if we really needed him. Then it hurt because he wasn’t there, and if we really didn’t need him, it still kind of hurt because he wasn’t there. But if we were having fun, like if he weren’t there, then we were not going to have as much fun because we would feel guilty about having it . . . Like, having fun without him . . . and if I didn’t feel guilty, I would feel guilty about not feeling guilty [smiles].

Other than for families who were going through divorces, the reintegrat-ion of the deployed parents was generally positive, especially the welcome home (Julia, age 15, female):

I remember he was stepping off the plane

the crowd cheering . . .

I remember it being so packed
I couldn’t even see him when he stepped off

I remember him running up to us and picking me and (brother) up . . .

I don’t know how to explain it . . .

The emptiness went away

I had a dad

I wanted to be inside (the house) more

It felt more complete

A few adolescents found it challenging to adjust during the reintegration of the deployed parent. For example, one adolescent experienced her father as more controlling after deployment; she did not feel as free to express herself and was silenced. Another adolescent, Elizabeth (age 14, female), described her father’s reintegration to be “difficult” saying,

Like, since he is home, I am confused, like, I don’t know. He is really difficult at times, so it is like I, like then, I was upset that he was gone, but right now, I wouldn’t care if he was gone or not, so. Yeah, and while he was gone, it was different, kind of upsetting, and now that he is back, it is like really confusing.

Although it was confusing to deal with behavioral changes in their deployed parents post deployment, a lack of change could also be perceived as “weird” (Shauna, age 13, female):

And then when he gets there (return) . . . it’s weird. You like, I had expected him to be different, because it was the second time that that he had been, and the first time when he got back he was really different. So I was expecting for that and he came back and he was the same . . . so it was weird.

The return of the deployed parent was welcomed and celebrated, but even this celebration could not be fully joyful—there was trepidation and anticipation of future deployments (Hayley, age 15, female)—“It hasn’t gotten easier because dad will always be gone (deployed).”

**Parentification and added responsibilities.** Deployment was associated with additional responsibilities, such as being “strong” for younger siblings. Many took the initiative to assume new responsibilities, while others were assigned
their new responsibilities. It was evident that the added responsibilities, regardless of whether they were assumed or assigned, would not have happened without deployment. Assuming the roles of the deployed parents often came naturally for the eldest children, as many self-parentified without any prompting by parents. The responsibilities that accompanied parentification included being confidants to younger siblings, helping out with household chores, and not displaying emotions that could expose their own sadness and stress, or trigger sadness and stress in family members. The need to be strong was by far the most common responsibility, as shared by Chelsea (age 16, female): “I was extremely determined to be strong for my family [crying] and, be positive about my dad being gone. Which I knew that I had to take care of a lot of those left behind.” Like many other adolescents, Billy (age 14, male) mirrored his mother’s strength:

Really my mom and I . . . are adapted to it, but it really hit my [younger] sister really hard . . . My mom and I are like—we’ll be getting ready to go to bed and just out of the blue she’ll [sister] have a break down. My mom and I are just sitting there fighting back our tears trying to not join in (cry) with her.

The role acquisition of parenting was common, but still confusing (Debbie, age 15, female):

So these are some of the things I had to help with that wasn’t, it just seemed I was older than, I felt older than I did before, and I really didn’t. I was the same age the whole time until the very end and then my birthday was at the very end of his deployment, so I was like the same age, but I felt way older than I was at the beginning, so.

Male adolescents, such as Nick (age 17, male), would sometimes promote themselves to the “man of the house”—“I’m obviously the alpha male when he (father) is away.” This new role was equated with being family protector (Kale, age 13, male):

I mean like with my dad

I feel like a little more protected

Since he is gone

I feel like

I have to protect the house while he’s gone
Many adolescents spoke about the added responsibility of maintaining their homes and preparing them for the return of their deployed parents. Considerable effort was put into up-keeping the physical home or family dwelling (Kale, age 13, male)—“Since my dad’s been gone our house has gotten just a little bit dirty so my mom and I are just like stressed a lot trying to keep it clean.” Extra effort was also required to prepare the home for the return of the deployed parent. Maintaining the home appeared to be symbolic of remaining strong and united, while preparing the home for the parent’s return appeared to be symbolic of a fresh start or showing that the family had coped well during deployment.

**Multiple losses.** Losses ranged from concrete (not being able to drive) to abstract (losing a portion of childhood). Many adolescents, like Debbie (age 15, female), were disturbed by the loss of opportunities for the deployed parent to be involved in school activities and birthdays:

> I don’t know. I felt like, I kind of I didn’t have as many like a lot of other kids that year, they all did, this is the worst thing. They all joined, they all went to the clubs sport teams, they all started all there like, they started on sports and I couldn’t do a club team. We didn’t have enough time, we didn’t have enough . . . We didn’t have enough money for them . . . It was just like I couldn’t do a lot of that, they all had time for parties, and sleepovers and everything, and I couldn’t go to all of those. I have like [in tears] the whole time, I had like my birthday, and one another, it was like, I just, I feel kind of I missed a whole year, like the kid things.

The loss of family members was not common, but when present, left a lasting impression. Hayley (age 15, female) shared that when her older step-sibling left abruptly during deployment, she had to assume the role of oldest sibling that remained in the home. This resulted in having to take on new responsibilities, while mourning the loss of being “cared for”:

> I couldn’t do anything about it. All of a sudden I am the oldest and I don’t know what to do because I’ve never been in this position. And then having him (father) gone—it just like dumped a whole lot of responsibility on me.

Three families experienced divorce during deployment. This change in the family’s identity and constellation was unanticipated and very difficult, as shared by Lisa (age 14, female)—Well my parents got a divorce while my mom was deployed, so it was like really hard.” Not only was the divorce experience strenuous, but the post divorce was equally strenuous—the occasional presence of the deployed parent was still experienced as an absence by
Elizabeth (age 14, female): “... my parents are divorced, and I live with my mom. So it is kind of hard. Like, he (father) will come over some times, but when he is there, you can tell ... he is not. It is obvious.”

**Family support.** Family was the main source of emotional support. Being able to count on family members for support, the increased closeness of the immediate family, and pride in the family were all cited as sources of strength. Increased family closeness was by far the most frequently named consequence of deployment, as described by (Darcy, age 14, female): “... we got really close, like most families it [deployment] kind of splits.” This closeness was one of the main features that helped adolescents feel supported during deployment. Family rituals helped foster closeness, as also described by Debbie (age 15, female):

> The whole time he was gone we read a book every night, we were reading this book ... We never finished it. And I just don’t want to read it now, because when I think of it, it is like, every night we read, right after, we had to stop, we couldn’t get very far because he would call and we stop, so we never finished it. It is still in my mom’s night stand, and I don’t think that any of us will ever finish it [smiles], but it is kind of a little memory of like, every night together.

Families drew so close to the extent that, for one adolescent, the level of closeness with her family helped her realize that if she had to, she could handle the demise of her deployed parent. This view however was not articulated by any other adolescent.

Activities with extended family members brought the whole family together and helped alleviate some of the stress of deployment. For a few adolescents, like Ann (age 13, female), grandparents were especially pertinent to their well-being:

> I don’t think anybody is like taking it as hard as my mom and I, and my sister and my brother are, um, but I know that like my grandpa and grandma, I’m really close to them, and like, ah, all I have to do is call them and I’ll be like ah, I need something to do and I’m lonely, and I know that they’ll come pick me up, and I know that my brother will like do the same thing.

Overall, family support was non-tangible. However, for a couple of adolescents in blended families, tangible means of support (debit cards) were provided by their deployed (biological) parents to serve as an assurance for the adolescents’ well-being (Billy, age 14):
. . . yeah, and my dad, before he left, he left each of my siblings, like, he left me, [sister 1], and [sister 2], like a thousand dollars each, for like, if we needed anything, like food, clothing, since, cause I know she [step-mother] wouldn’t have paid for us, my stepmom, like if she really had to, but um, before he left we got debit cards, and that money was on our accounts . . . And I had my mom and she spoils me [laughs]. Yes I got a lot of stuff.

One of the most cherished forms of connection with deployed parents was sharing daily events, especially humorous ones. Non-deployed parents helped orchestrate this interaction by encouraging the recording of events on paper or on audiotape (Debbie, age 15, female):

That was the favorite thing. We had a box in our kitchen, like a big, a mailbox, and we set down in the kitchen and we gradually just fill it up and then when it was full we would send it. And we would all go shopping and every time we were like “oh, dad would like this,” and we get for him. So it was like some of the things was like we just acted as if he was still there, and that he was not just with us some of the times because he was at the store.

Family vacations and rituals were other ways families fostered closeness and helped reintegrate the deployed parents. Recalling the end of one deployment and the beginning of a new chapter, Julia (age 15, female) shared, “We ripped the (yellow) ribbons off the trees—we would get the big scissors and just chop them all up and throw them away.”

Family pride. Adolescents were bursting with pride for their deployed parents, and their families as a whole, because of their strength and what they stood for (Chelsea, age 16, female):

Well it’s kind of double meaning, [be]cause, you, like can imagine that you don’t even realize how strong somebody has to be to leave their whole family behind just to fight for their country. And also, your whole family has to be really strong too, like, stay together through all of it.

Pride for the deployed parent helped mitigate the emptiness of deployment as demonstrated by Cara’s (age 14, female) comment, “. . . he loves it when he is over there, . . . he wants to serve his country.” This pride influenced many to want to continue the legacy of their parents and to serve their country, even from a very young age, such as Nick (age 17, male), “Absolutely every day . . . I probably realized that when I was about ten to twelve years old.”
Friends and School

Friends and school offered a means of escape from the stresses at home by providing much-needed distraction. However, friends, many of whom were not military-connected, could not appreciate what adolescents were going through, and as such, could not serve as trusted confidants. Nick (age 17, male) shared his difficult experience at the beginning of his father’s deployment, and how the difficulty of not knowing whether his father would return was exacerbated by his unwillingness to reach out to his friends for support:

One week, it’s the element of not knowing when he is gonna be back. Two weeks [into the deployment] gets queasy—you just you’re done with school, you’re done with friends—you can’t go to them for support and it’s just really hard.

Involvement in school sports helped interrupt stressful lives, yet the school environment was not always supportive. A couple of adolescents such as Cara (age 14, female) were bullied by their school mates for having a parent in the military—with statements such as, “At least my dad had the sense to find a job that lets him sleep in his own bed at night.” Only for one adolescent did the School Counselor serve an important role during deployment. Another adolescent, Kale (age 13, male), said, “It was very helpful to have teachers around that knew what I was going through.”

Community Connection

Only two community components were found to be pertinent to the deployment experience—neighbors and resources offered by the National Guard.

Neighbors. Neighbors helped with yard work, dinners, and childcare—“Like, if anything needed to be done at all it was like done before we could even say it. Like, they (neighbors) mowed our grass for us” (Simeon, age 16, female). One adolescent related how she and her siblings would stay with their neighbors when their non-deployed parent would travel for work, (Julie, age 14, female) and another (Billy, age 14, male) found sanctuary with a neighbor when his relationship with his non-deployed parent was strained and intolerable.

The involvement of the community was incredibly meaningful, though rare. For example, Laura (age 16, female) shared how the “town” came together to welcome her father home:
We made a big banner that said “Welcome Home Daddy”—hung it above the garage, and then we got the whole town involved. And the streets had yellow ribbons on all the trees, and we had a bridge coming into town. So we had all the flags going across the bridge so all you could see was the flags. And the grocery store sign—it said “Welcome Home (father’s name)”—it’s pretty cool.

However, many adolescents did not experience their neighbors or communities as supportive. It appeared that these military families might not have wanted tangible forms of support, and would have preferred emotional support, which was not always available. Shawn (age 13, male) shared how despite the possibility of talking to neighbors or to his brother when having a bad day, there were times when he simply felt lonely:

Some days I would, I would sometimes, ums go to my neighbors or maybe talk to my eight year old brother about it [bad days]. But it was, kind of, alone because my siblings were still really small and they were always with friends and I was just kind of alone.

National guard resources. Only three adolescents spoke of how they used military services provided to National Guard families. Support from peers at a camp for National Guard children, the National Guard Support Groups in schools and involvement as a Council member were especially helpful (Lisa, age 14, female):

Like I got to meet new people who go to the same thing, like participant camp. I have found people who you can relate to, and people at like school. It is kind of different like having a . . . school Army.

It was unclear if access to services for Guard families were readily available to all adolescents in this study, or if they simply chose not to participate. Either way, this was not a widely tapped resource.

Society and Media

Societal and media messages perceived as derogative toward the military activated some adolescents to take a stand and defend the military. Images that portrayed soldiers sitting around and “hanging out” while deployed were considered offensive. Hayley (age 15, female) shared her drawing of her deployment experiences which included a flag with the words “They Fought.” She explained that she wants people to know that her deployed father went
out with a gun to protect the country. Andrew (age 14, male) spoke of how they wanted people to know that “. . . most of it [deployment] is not about protecting the U.S. It’s about protecting families” in the U.S., as well as abroad.

Overall, adolescents were passionate about their need to correct or avoid messages perpetuated by the media. The following I-poem reflects Debbie’s (age 15, female) attempt to avoid media which she perceived as exaggerating the truth:

I like stopped watching the news
I would change the channel
I didn’t like watching it
I didn’t want to hear anything
I didn’t want to worry
I was there anywhere the news was on
I could leave
I would leave
I could change it
I would change it or just don’t watch
I just didn’t like hearing any of the stories

**Discussion**

This study explored the development of resilience in adolescents from National Guard families whose parents had been deployed. Themes reflect adolescents’ resilience which is supported by self-reports of minimal increase in difficulty in matters such as school work and mood problems. Findings suggest that personal courage and accelerated maturity can help adolescents cope with deployment especially when there are few effective outlets to express emotions. Unfortunately, interactions with systems outside the family do not always contribute to adolescents’ resilience as expected (R. Gilligan, 2001) but instead require resilience—to manage stress as a result of
these interactions. Adolescents’ experiences with family can buffer or compensate the lack of support from external systems—schools, communities, and the media/society (R. Gilligan, 2001).

A prominent theme is the privacy and self-reliance of the adolescents, both of which reflect Army values (Rush, 2006). Adolescents, especially the oldest children and boys, are more prone to fend for their own emotional needs. The inability of peers to relate to the adolescents’ experiences and the lack of support from school teachers and administrators leave adolescents with only their families to whom they can turn. Even so, adolescents are reluctant to fully confide in their families. Family activities help foster bonding but tend to neglect the emotional needs of adolescents. Findings revealed that the absence of emotional support can silence adolescents who then find ways to self-soothe their worries and sadness—leading to isolation.

The silencing of these adolescents is reflected in their frequent use of the word “weird” to describe emotional experiences during deployment. It was as if the interviews were the first time the adolescents were asked to share their deployment experiences. The restraining silence that adolescents experienced may explain the out-pouring of emotions during the interviews. Adolescents’ self-reliance and silence mirror the overall stance of self-sufficiency in military families especially when support is lacking from the community. Being self-sufficient reflects the Army’s cultural value of personal courage (Rush, 2006). Military families must be strong and resilient in order to thrive, and these families may naturally and intentionally instill these values into their children to help them cope with adversities.

The act of self-reliance may be construed as resilience (Hill et al., 2007). However, when stories of deployment bring forth intense, vivid, painful emotions after a lapse of up to 10 years, we wonder if these reactions are indicative of internalizing problems found in Flake, Davis, Johnson, and Middleton’s (2009) study of military-connected children whose parents were deployed for war. Are military-connected children deprived of healthy and effective means of coping if we label their silence resilience? There is no doubt that it takes courage and resilience to contain stress for 10 years or more; but for adolescents this would mean almost their entire childhood. In what ways silencing emotionally charged reactions indicative of resilience?

Not only is silence common among adolescents but also among parents who choose to remain silent about the family’s military status. The need to maintain anonymity may be related to security reasons. While anonymity has a function, it may disadvantage military families because it shields them from community members who may be eager to help during deployment. The possible impact of parents’ anonymity on the adolescents reflects how parent-community relationships can influence adolescent-parent relationships.
(Lerner & Castellino, 2002). Observing parents’ non-disclosure may send the implicit message that silence, self-reliance, and invisibility are valued. Such disengagement and isolation may seem useful in the short term but can have long-term consequences on the adolescents’ development (Erickson & Henderson, 1998).

Findings support previous research that peer groups are important for adolescents (Steinberg, 2014). However, although military-connected adolescents seek out their non-military-connected peers to help cope with deployment stress, these peer groups cannot serve as confidants since they lack the ability to fully appreciate deployment and its related stress. The accelerated trajectory of developmental growth that military-connected children experience may explain the inability to develop mutually rewarding relationships with peers who are on a normal developmental trajectory. The incompatible growth trajectory can contribute to further isolation for these adolescents who find themselves caught between feeling more mature than their peers and not feeling as mature as their parents. Despite the lack of emotional support from peer groups, these groups are nevertheless helpful in buffering familial adversities (e.g., Bukowski, 2003).

Adolescents’ relationships with deployed parents are influenced by the relationships between deployed and non-deployed parents. Adolescents depend on non-deployed parents to make and maintain contact with deployed parents. This dependency is reasonable given adolescents’ limited access to out-of-country means of communication. The quality and type of marriage/relationship between parents can influence the quality of relationships between adolescents and their deployed parents (Lerner & Castellino, 2002). This was evident in the families that were going through a divorce.

The lack of connection with the community was unexpected especially when Guard families, who do not experience frequent relocations, have more opportunities to foster relationships within their communities. It is unfortunate that the limited resources derived from schools and communities left Guard families deprived of the protection that these systems can potentially offer (e.g., R. Gilligan, 2001).

Another systemic influence on adolescents is the media. Media messages, while negative, serve to activate adolescents to counter inaccurate depictions of the military. However, the responsibility to correct inaccuracies is burdensome—beyond adolescents’ normal developmental trajectory. Adolescents’ overall response to non-supportive classmates, misinformed community members, or misguided media messages is impressive. The ability of the adolescents to provide correct information in an attempt to respectfully defend their deployed parent and/or the military reflects their maturity and loyalty to
their families and the military (Rush, 2006). Adolescents’ responses further illustrate how parental work networks (military) shape the adolescents’ sense of responsibility (Lerner & Castellino, 2002).

**Implications and Further Research**

This study highlights how community, society, and culture matter during an adolescent’s experience of deployments. Any further examination of adolescent development should include an ecological framework that considers multiple contexts simultaneously, as family and peer networks are the primary support for adolescents.

Military-connected adolescents value ordinary rituals of family life, such as dinners and catching up at the end of the day, which bring families together. These activities foster closeness, communication, and connection, while helping adolescents manage the stress of having a deployed parent. However, it is necessary that parents initiate and create opportunities for adolescents to process their deployment experiences. Adolescents do not always seek out their parents because they may not know how to initiate conversations about deployment or express their fears and worries because they do not want to exacerbate their parents’ fears and worries. Given that parents can buffer children from environmental adversities (Hill et al., 2007), parents have an important role in helping with handling deployment stress especially when schools, peers, and the community cannot be relied upon.

Non-military-connected peers have a different role for military-connected adolescents compared with their military family members. Because peers cannot identify with deployment, they cannot provide the same depth of emotional support equivalent to that in families. The role of peers may be to provide a means to escape the reality of deployment and to provide a refuge from military-connected adolescents’ family stresses.

Social connection extends beyond the immediate family to include extended family, neighbors/community, and school. Although these adolescents do not necessarily seek out these connections, they are nonetheless influential. Several neighbors and community members appear to be eager to assist when approached by military families. Research has shown there is much to benefit from the goodwill of neighborhoods and communities, as they can have a positive influence on adolescent development (e.g., Youngblade et al., 2007). However, the rarity of families reaching out to neighbors and community members is an area that needs to be further explored. The perceived negligible support offered by school networks, although discouraging, is consistent with previous findings (e.g., Otto & Atkinson, 1997). There is a need for school-systems to be more aware of and
reach out to military students, especially those from the National Guard, or those who do not live on installations which offer resources for families. National Guard families may benefit from increased involvement and support from schools and communities especially during deployment. Ways in which schools and communities can be involved need to be explored before programs can be implemented.

This study has several implications for the mental health of adolescents. Adolescents’ unprocessed experiences of parental deployment can sustain perpetual, unresolved uncertainties and worries affecting the adolescents that if not processed can develop into anxiety symptoms. Regardless of the time that has passed since the parental deployment, it would be important that adolescents process their deployment experiences. Making meaning out of previous coping attempts can help build resilience and prepare adolescents to face future deployments and similar difficulties.

Adolescents’ rapid and sudden maturity can be confusing for the adolescents especially when it is accompanied with added roles and responsibilities in the family but with no more authority or voice. The absence of any prospects to voice concerns that the adolescents may have can lead to isolation, depression, and methods of self-soothing that could be harmful. Adolescents can benefit from processing their rapid growth in maturity during deployment to support their move from self-reliance to steadfast resilience.

**Limitations**

Limitations include the lack of follow-up interviews with participants. Furthermore, studies should ideally track participants over time from childhood to adolescence to gain a better picture of what contributes to resilience across adolescents’ developmental trajectory. The convenience sampling used in this study means that the findings may not be generalizable to all adolescents in National Guard families. Lastly, although interviewers were trained to use the interview guide, having multiple interviewers risk reduced coherence in the interview process.

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