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Pediatrician soldiers on the front lines for military families

Last week, I had the honor of joining military pediatricians at their annual educational seminar. These physician soldiers have made a personal commitment to care for American troops deployed around the world, and their families. Sitting and learning with them as they discussed issues unique to military pediatric medicine and the special needs of children and families with deployed parents, I realized that few of us understand the burden borne by our military families and children.

In the past, the roles of military pediatricians did not differ significantly from that of their civilian colleagues, except that their primary responsibility was to care for the children of US military personnel. Since September 11, 2001, however, much has changed. Pediatricians are now soldiers as well as physicians. These men and women, in almost equal numbers, still care for the children of military families, but they also care for our adolescent soldiers in war zones as well as the sick and injured children who suffer from the collateral effects of war. They are a proud and confident group of professionals.

Almost all Army pediatricians have completed a tour in Afghanistan or Iraq and half have been in theater at least twice. When deployed, these physicians may provide routine health care to our troops or aid in surgery and triage at combat support units, similar to the MASH units we remember from movies and television. The quality of care they render and the success of their interventions are unprecedented, as new and innovative techniques evolve in even the most difficult environments.

When not caring for our troops, these physicians have joined a pacification effort, providing care for ill or injured children in these dangerous and unforgiving environments. Modern American medicine can be a powerful tool for curing disease and relieving suffering. Hopefully, this quality medical care will convince the skeptical citizens of these countries that American's are committed to their well-being.

Armed services pediatricians assigned to service within the United States must educate civilian physicians about the special needs of families and children of deployed soldiers who are at special risk, in addition to providing care to military dependents.

Separation from family is stressful under the best of circumstances. Deployment is particularly challenging, due to its danger, mysterious unpredictability, and undetermined length of time away. Every member of a military family faces separation in a unique manner. As deployment approaches, pre-separation stress begins and parents and children may exhibit sadness, fear, anger, and denial. Anxiety over deployment can lead to sleep problems, depression, and feelings of guilt.

Returning from a long tour of duty can be overwhelming, as well. Parents and children may both experience the loss of independence and resist the return to former relationships. It may take time for individual family members to rediscover special feelings and to reopen lines of communication.

While too numerous to list here, some pediatric physical and behavioral difficulties associated with military deployment or separation are:

- Infants (birth-1 year): Fussiness, clinging, and difficulty sleeping.
- Toddlers (age 1-3 years): Whining, clinging, and displaying signs of regression.
- Preschoolers: Sleep difficulties, anxiety, and clinginess.
- School-age children: Stomachaches, headaches, and perform poorly in school.
- Teenagers: Significant personality changes or depression.

The impact of war and deployment on military families and their medical care providers is more significant than most citizens realize. It is critical that families who are experiencing either direct or indirect effects of military stressors understand that there is support available and that they are not alone. If you or a family experiences these concerns seek help from your pediatrician. For those with a need to know more about pediatrics in the military, visit [www. AAP.org](http://www.AAP.org) or search "Deployment and Children" online.

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