Military Deployment in a Family: Children's Literature as a Basis for Counseling Support

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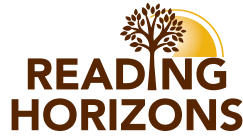
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—— **Abstract** ——

The authors summarize 30 children's books that tell stories of a family member's military deployment in order to identify books that could be used in bibliotherapy for children impacted by deployment. In this sample of books, the main characters are most commonly portrayed as feeling sad about a family member's deployment. The most prevalent coping strategies are finding ways to stay connected to the deployed person and talking with an adult. An unexpected finding was a coping strategy of expressing pride in the family member's military service.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, military deployment, children's literature

According to U.S. military records, prior to 2011 approximately 2.1 million military personnel were deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND; Bonds, Baiocchi, & McDonald, 2010). Half of those deployed were separated from dependent children (Bonds et al., 2010; Institute of Medicine, 2013). Given that deployment generates a great deal of stress for military families with children (Bradshaw, Figiel, & Deutsch, 2014), developing resources that support families, educators, community leaders, and mental health professionals can be especially important since almost one third of children separated by a parent's deployment have experienced depression and anxiety, feelings of sadness with associated bouts of crying, decreased interest in activities, feelings of isolation, and changes in sleeping and eating patterns (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011; Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Lester et al., 2010; Paley, Lester, & Mogil, 2013).

Children's Literature to Support Military Families

The use of stories to help strengthen adaptive coping—bibliotherapy—has been utilized to support children who struggle with a variety of issues, such as bullying, depression, eating disorders, divorce, grief, and stress-related physical disorders (Berns, 2004; Pehrsson, 2007; Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006). Bibliotherapy is often used to increase children's insight about personal problems, which may have been previously stifled or hidden from others (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993). After completing an extensive literature review of bibliotherapy research, Montgomery and Maunders (2015) reported that bibliotherapy was moderately effective when used to address children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, and bibliotherapy interventions helped increase children's prosocial behaviors. Rapee, Abbott, and Lyneham (2006) reported that bibliotherapy helped reduce children's anxiety. Unfortunately, no research has been conducted and published that specifically addresses the effectiveness of using bibliotherapy with children in military families.

For children coping with a parent's deployment, mental health providers can use children's literature to promote insight, model coping strategies, and decrease children's sense of isolation (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015). Some children may find it easier to talk about story characters' emotions and experiences rather than their own experiences and feelings (Berns, 2004). Reading about others who have successfully dealt with similar challenges helps children envision the possibility of positive outcomes and adaptive coping (Pardeck, 1995). Ideally, this experience helps children generalize the story's resolution into their own life experience.

Although the potential selection of children's books about a loved one's military deployment is increasing, the characteristics and quality of these books have not been analyzed and summarized. We undertook such an analysis. To increase the likelihood of a child connecting or identifying with characters in a selected story, books considered for bibliotherapy should reflect the demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity) of deployed military and military families—and should mirror details about the specific child who is being counseled (Gregory & Vessey, 2004).

Stress Experienced by Military Children

In their study of military children ages 12–18, Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, and Grass (2007) reported that following a family member's deployment, older youth experienced symptoms related to boundary ambiguity, which are likely related to changes in children's roles and family responsibilities in the home. Huebner et al. noted that additional stressors included worrying about the deployed parent's safety, missing the military person, and experiencing frequent intense emotions related to new routines, increased and changing family responsibilities, and intensified conflict in family relationships. Although these findings reflected the needs of an older age group, it is likely that some of the same

symptoms may be pertinent for younger ages depending on the child's maturity and other contextual variables. Mustillo, Wadsworth, and Lester (2016) found that younger children experienced more than expected social anxiety, while older children experienced peer and emotional problems.

Parents and teachers have noted that children of deployed personnel often show problems at school, including an increase in externalizing (e.g., aggression, arguing, noncompliance) and internalizing behaviors (e.g., depression, anxiety, withdrawal; Nelson, Baker, & Weston, 2016). And finally, Millegan, Engle, Liu, and Dinneen (2013) found that psychiatric hospitalizations increased 10% for children ages 9–17 when their parent was recently deployed compared to other military children whose parent was not deployed.

Furthermore, children's developmental trajectory is affected: Deployment negatively affects children's psychosocial functioning during the deployment and continues beyond the deployed parent's return (Bello-Utu & DeSocio, 2015; Lester et al., 2010). For some children, their parents' deployment could cover about 20% of their lives, exposing them to long-term stress (Mustillo et al., 2016). Chandra and colleagues (2010) reported that the length of parental deployment was strongly correlated with the amount of challenges youth faced while the caregiver was away, although the specific types of challenges were not articulated in the study. Girls and youth in middle and late adolescence experienced more difficulties than younger children. The available research clearly shows that the mental health concerns for military children are well documented and warrant thoughtful interventions.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to identify books related to the military deployment of a family member and that tell a story from a child's perspective. Since military families are likely to have young children between the ages of 3 and 8 (Clever & Segal, 2013), this study focused on books that are appropriate for this particular age range. A secondary purpose of this study was to extract descriptive information from the identified books and to analyze each book's content. A third purpose was to identify common problems and coping strategies of the children who are main characters that experience a loved one's deployment in the selected books. The results of this review are intended to help school-based mental health providers and other caring adults choose stories that will support children who are coping with the deployment of a family member.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research:

1. What books related to military deployment of a family member are available for children ages 3–8?

2.   Based on the identified books, what are the characteristics of the children, families, and aspects of deployment portrayed in the stories (e.g., gender of main child character, gender of deployed person, predeployment, reintegration)?

3.   Based on the sample books, what are the common problems and coping strategies of the children who are main characters and who experience a loved one's deployment?

Method

Research Design

The design of this research was a descriptive content analysis of children's literature related to military deployments. The design was based on previous research conducted by Moulton, Heath, Prater, and Dyches (2011) and Pajo and Stuart (2012).

Book Selection Criteria

Several websites were used to identify picture books and chapter books appropriate for the sample: (a) our sponsoring university's online search catalog, (b) www.booksinprint.com, (c) www.barnesandnoble.com, (d) www.amazon.com, (e) www.militaryfamilybooks.com, (f) www.myarmyonesource.com, and (g) the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database.

Picture books were defined as books that had illustrations that dominated the space on each page, books that included simple text and were intended to be read aloud to young children. Picture books are intended to provide a visual experience for the child (American Library Association, 2008). Early chapter books were distinguished from chapter books written for older children and adolescents. Early chapter books had between 40 and 90 pages. Additionally, early chapter books were distinguished from chapter books for older children either by using the publisher's identified target audience or by determining the book's reading level using www.lexile.com. We acknowledge that those books not included in this study may be very useful in therapeutic practice, but the scope of this research was focused on books with a main character and a story format to align with the bibliotherapy process.

Out of 42 originally identified children's books, a sample of 30 books met the criteria and were included in the analysis. Only books written in English were included, and selection for this study was based on the following criteria:

•   Because this study focused on children, the main character in each selected book was a child (or a child portrayed by an animal character), rather than the deployed person or his or her spouse. A child's perspective was proposed to facilitate children mediating, exploring, and understanding their own feelings related to a loved one's military deployment. Books that were disqualified were handbooks or workbooks or a book with no clearly defined story, such as one alphabet-type book.

- The target reading level of each selected book was specified as appropriate for children ages 3–8, with a Lexile of beginning reader to 820L. Lexile scores are a way of matching children's reading skills with text demand (Lexile Framework for Reading, 2019). The identified Lexile range was based on the 2012 Common Core State Standards Text Measures (Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards, 2012) to correlate with preschool through third grade and 8-year-old expanded-level student reading skills. This skill range matches the common age range of children who have a parent who is deployed (Clever & Segal, 2013). Although a broader Lexile range could have been included, we determined that having books that children could read independently and with an adult was essential for the bibliotherapy process.

- Because children's books go out of print relatively quickly, only books published between 2000 and 2015 and accessible through a major university library, interlibrary loan, or easily purchased for a reasonable price through an online bookstore (e.g., Amazon) were included.

- To be consistent with main subjects, themes, or keywords in a database or catalog search, each selected book was described with one or more of the following word(s): *military deployment*, *military children*, *military families*; variants and related words such as *deployment* and *armed forces* were also included.

Measure

Each book was analyzed with a coding instrument titled Military Bibliotherapy Coding Instrument for Children's Books (MBCICB), which was adapted from a coding instrument based on two previous studies that analyzed storybook content: Moulton et al. (2011) and Pajo and Stuart (2012). The MBCICB contains 28 items covering a range of topics. The first seven questions involve factual responses identifying the book, such as the title and author. The next 19 questions have multiple-choice response options that are related to demographic features of the story characters and the military service of the deployed person. The last two questions, which are concerned with the problem's resolution, offer an open-ended response option. Specifically, the MBCICB helped to identify strategies for dealing with deployment and resolutions for problems. A copy of the MBCICB is included in the Appendix.

Procedures

Using the MBCICB, the identified books were analyzed by independent raters (the primary researcher and a trained second rater). All raters were trained by initially reading one picture book together and jointly discussing and completing the coding instrument. Then each coder independently completed the coding instrument on another picture book. During this initial phase of coding, each response was discussed and, in the case of differing responses, discrepancies were resolved with a third coder's decision.

Three separate reliability checks were conducted on the coding. Each reliability check was based on two coders' independent coding of three sets of three books chosen at random. Nine of the 30 books in this study were audited to determine percentage of coding agreement. A comparison of coding responses yielded inter-rater reliability data. For three separate reliability checks (three different books for each reliability check), the two independent coders agreed on 95%, 91%, and 89% of the coding variables, respectively. Across the three checks, an average agreement of 92% was documented.

Results

A wide variety of books was identified that addressed children's encounters when a family member experiences a military deployment. The characteristics of the books, characters, deployment, and coping strategies are described below and summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Demographic Information of the Main Characters and Deployed Persons

Main character (MC). One of the 30 books has three MCs. This book, *While You Were Away*, includes three stories, each with its own MC. Thus, any category that evaluates the MC has an *N* equal to 32. In the majority of the stories (93.8%, *n* = 30), the characters are human. One book, *My Mommy Wears Combat Boots*, features a bear as the MC. Another book, *Why Is Dad So Mad*?, features a lion as the MC.

Age of main character. All of the stories' main characters are children. Almost half of the MCs are in the age range of 6–8 years (43.8%, *n* = 14), followed by the age range of 3–5 years (28.1%, *n* = 9), 9–11 years (18.8%, *n* = 6), and 12+ years (9.4%, *n* = 3). In this study, contextual clues were used to determine the age range of characters whose ages are not specified (e.g., contextual clues indicating that the child attended school or preschool).

Gender of main character and deployed person (DP). The majority of the MCs portrayed are male (62.5%, *n* = 20); females are less frequently represented (34.4%, *n* = 11), and the gender of one story's MC is not identified. The majority of the DPs in the stories are male (78.1%, *n* = 25), with females represented as the deployed person only six times (18.8%). In the book *What Will I Play While You Are Away?* it is unclear whether it is the father or mother who is the DP (3.1%, *n* = 1). All but one of the male DPs is a father, one male DP is a brother, and all of the female DPs are mothers.

Race/ethnicity of main character and deployed person. The analysis of race/ethnicity of the MCs and DPs was determined largely through the pictures and context cues in the book. In some books determination of race or ethnicity was impeded because race is represented solely by pictures or vague contextual clues. Therefore, the race of many MCs and DPs was categorized as unknown if it was obviously not White but another race not clear in the illustrations or context. White was the most common race of the MCs (62.5%, *n* = 20), with 3.1% (*n* = 1) Black and 6.3% (*n* = 2) Hispanic. For 21.9% (*n* = 7),

race was indicated as unknown. The proportions of each racial group for DP matched the proportions of the racial groups for MC.

Deployment of the Military Person

Characteristics of deployment. When analyzing the books for the phase of deployment, the researchers found deployment characteristics in the following eight general categories: notification/predeployment, departure, beginning of deployment, middle of deployment, end of deployment, reunion, reintegration, and unknown. The majority of books address more than one phase (e.g., beginning, middle, and end), so the percentages reflect the frequency of that deployment phase in this sample. The location of the deployment was not mentioned in most of the books. Table 1 lists the lengths, types, and descriptions of deployments represented in the books. Only 17 (53.1%) of the 32 stories address reunion with the DP, and only one (*Why Is Dad So Mad?*) addresses reintegration.

Table 1. Length, Type, and Description of Deployment

Category	Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Length of deployment	Unknown	24	75.0
	6 months or less	2	6.3
	7–12 months	6	18.8
	13+ months	0	0.0
Phase of deployment	Notification	8	26.7
	Departure	19	63.3
	Beginning deployment	16	53.3
	Middle of deployment	22	68.8
	End of deployment	22	68.8
	Reunion	17	56.7
	Reintegration	1	3.3
	Unknown	1	3.3
Location of deployment	Unknown	24	75.0
	Inside U.S.	0	0.0
	Outside U.S., non–war	0	0.0
	zone	8	26.7
	Outside U.S., war zone	0	0.0
Branch of service	Army	10	31.3
	Unknown	13	40.6
	Navy	4	12.5
	Air Force	3	9.4
	Marines	1	3.1
	Army National Guard	1	3.1
	Coast Guard	0	0.0
	Air National Guard	0	0.0
	Navy Reserve	0	0.0
	Air Reserve	0	0.0
	Army Reserve	0	0.0

Emotional responses and strategies of the main character related to deployment. Sadness was the dominant emotional response of the MCs (62.5%, $n = 20$). Further analysis of sadness did not reveal nuances or more specific information about how the MC displayed sadness. Crying, scared, and worried about the safety of DP were each noted in 28.1% ($n = 9$) of the stories. Being angry was noted in 18.8% ($n = 6$) of the books, and being unsure was noted in 9.4% ($n = 3$) of the stories. The following emotional responses were

each found in one (3.1%) of the books: physical complaints, pride in DP service, school problems, worried DP will not recognize MC upon return, being mean and stubborn, not knowing what to do with time, and anxious about reunion.

Staying connected to the DP is the most common strategy used to address the emotional issues of the MC; the majority of stories (62.5%, *n* = 20) describe how writing letters and sending packages are ways to stay connected with the DP. Talking to an adult was included in 12 (37.5%) of the stories. Drawing pictures and engaging in physical activity were each identified in seven (21.9%) of the books, while journaling was included in two stories (6.3%), and expression of pride was noted in three books (9.4%).

Emotional responses of the deployed person. Challenges or emotional issues experienced by the DP are represented in 11 of the 32 stories (34.4%). Dominant emotional responses in the books tend to reflect internalizing emotions of the child, such as feeling sad, being frightened, crying, and worrying about the safety of the DP. Four include references to the DP missing his or her family, one reports homesickness of the DP, and one describes the DP being proud of the family at home. Sadness is included in two other books. For example, in the book *Why My Dad?* the child mentions that his "dad was red in the face and close to tears" (p. 10) while telling the MC he had to go away. The book *Why Is Dad So Mad?* details the father's posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms during reintegration.

Just two books (6.3%) included descriptions of children's externalizing behaviors. Similarly, only four of the books noted conflict at home. The books included a wide range of coping strategies. Table 2 summarizes the emotional responses of the main character and a variety of other characteristics described in the books. A frequent response of the MC is being sad, scared, or worried about the DP's safety. Two books (6.3%) in this sample include descriptions of a child's externalizing behaviors. Four of the books identify conflict at home. Only one book mentions difficulty at school.

Discussion

We gathered a comprehensive sample of children's books conveying a story about a family experiencing a loved one's military deployment. We summarized and compared these books to the current research literature on how military deployment affects children (e.g., depression, aggression, loneliness, anxiety). Additionally, we identified a variety of coping strategies employed by the characters in the stories.

Connections to Research Literature and Demographic Variables

Currently, preschool and early elementary school children are frequently affected by parents' participation in military units (Clever & Segal, 2013). The largest number of books in this sample are directed toward children between the ages of 6 and 8, which is understandable since our efforts were intended to identify young children's storybooks and early chapter books.

Table 2. Bibliographic Information of Children's Books Related to Military Deployment

Title	Author and (illustrator)	Date	ISBN and Publisher	Lexile	MC, gender, race	DP gender, race	Role of DP	Branch of service	MC response to deployment	MC coping strategies
Ned and the General	Ron Madison	2001	9781887206259 Ned's Heads Books	320	Male, unknown, 6–8	Male, unknown	Father	Army	Sad, problems with schoolwork, scared angry	Talking to adult, physical activity, being proud of DP
Daddy's Deployment	Lorin Sanchez Neslony & Jake Neslony (Sharon Graham Smith)	2001	9780615621227 Christian Military	830	Male, White, 6–8	Male, White	Father	Unknown	Sad, scared	Physical activity, praying, spending time with family
A Year Without Dad	Jodi Cramer Brunson	2003	9780972926430 Ithaca Press	490	Male, White, 9–11	Male, White	Father	Army	Sad, scared, worried about DP safety	Talking to adult, finding ways to stay connected, drawing pictures, attending family support group meetings, learning about place of deployment
My Big Brother	Miriam Cohen (Ronald Himler)	2004	9781595720078 Star Bright Books	410	Male, Black, 9–11	Male, Black	Brother	Army	Sad	Talking to adult, finding ways to stay connected, washing DP's car while he is away
Daddy is a Soldier	Kirsten Hallowell	2004	9781412018531 Trafford	290	Male, White, 3–5	Male, White	Father	Unknown	Sad, angry	Finding ways to stay connected, keeping DP picture by bed
My Mommy is a Guardsman	Kirk Hilbrecht & Sharon Hillbrecht	2004	9780972926430 New Canaan	550	Male, White, 6–8	Female, White	Mother	Army National Guard	Sad	Finding ways to stay connected, drawing pictures
While You Are Away	Eileen Spinelli (Rachel Graef)	2004	9781423113515 Hyperion Paperbacks for Children	480	2 male/1 female, White/Hispanic/Black, 6–8, & 9–11	2 male/1 female, White/Black/Hispanic	Father & mother	Army, Air Force, Navy	Sad, worried about DP safety	Finding ways to stay connected

Table 2 Continued

Title	Author and (illustrator)	Date	ISBN and Publisher	Lexile	MC, gender, race	DP gender, race	Role of DP	Branch of service	MC response to deployment	MC coping strategies
My Red Balloon	Eve Bunting (Kay Life)	2005	9781595078263T Boyds Mill Press	730	Male, White, 3–5	Male, White	Father	Navy	Worried DP will not recognize MC on return	Holding red balloon at reunion for identification
Mommy, You're My Hero!	Michelle Ferguson-Cohen	2005	9780972926430	400	Female, unknown, 3–5	Female, unknown	Mother	Unknown	Sad	Talking to adult, drawing pictures
Love Lizzie	Lisa Tucker McElroy (Diane Paterson)	2005	9780807547779	730	Female, White, 6–8	Female, White	Mother	Unknown	Worried about DP safety	Finding ways to stay connected, drawing, special place to be alone
My Dad Is Going Away but He Will Be Back One Day: A Deployment Story	James Thomas	2005	9781468175455	550	Unknown, White, 3–5	Male, White	Father	Navy	Unsure	Finding ways to stay connected, physical activity
A Paper Hug	Stephanie Skolmoski (Annelise Bennion)	2006	9780978642501 Self-published	620	Male, White, 6–8	Male, White	Father	Unknown	Sad, crying	Finding ways to stay connected
My Daddy is a Hero	Chad Childers) Jane Massey)	2007	9781430321958 Barron's Educational Series	610	Male, White, 6–8	Male, White	Father	Army	Sad, crying	Finding ways to stay connected
My Dad's a Hero	Rebecca Christiansen & Jewel Armstrong (Jen O. Robertson)	2007	9781595712097 Word Association	AD730	Male, unknown, unknown	Male, unknown	Father	Unknown	Pride	Finding ways to stay connected, drawing pictures, thinking of DP as a hero
Night Coach	Brenda Ehrmantraut (Vicki Wehrman)	2007	9780972983396 Bubblegum Press	630	Male, White, 6–8	Male, White	Father	Army	Unsure	Finding ways to stay connected
I'm a Hero Too	Jenny Sokol	2007	9781425989859	750	Male, White, 9–11	Male, White	Father	Marines	Sad, crying, scared, worried about DP safety, angry	Talking to adult, journaling, finding ways to stay connected, drawing pictures, doing physical activity

Table 2 Continued

Title	Author and (illustrator)	Date	ISBN and Publisher	Lexile	MC, gender, race	DP gender, race	Role of DP	Branch of service	MC response to deployment	MC coping strategies
My Mommy Wears Combat Boots	Sharon G. McBride	2008	9781434351647 AuthorHouse	570	Female, unknown, 3–5	Female, unknown	Mother	Army	Sad, crying, scared, angry	Talking to adult, praying
The Wishing Tree	Mary Redman (Christina Rodriquez)	2008	9781934617021 Elva Resa	500	Female, White, 911	Male, White	Father	Unknown	Sad, worried about DP safety	Talking to adult, finding ways to stay connected, keeping a wishing tree
I Wish Daddy Was Here	Katherine DeMille (Greg White)	2009	9781607998587 Tate	870	Female, White, 3–5	Male, White	Father	Unknown	Sad	Talking to a caring adult, physical activity, reading a book, visiting places in the community
But...What If?	Sandra Miller Linhart (Tahna Marie Desmond)	2009	9780984512720 LionHeart	480	Male, White, 6–8	Male, Unknown	Father	Unknown	Crying, worried	Talking to a caring adult
Boo Boo Bear's Mission: The True Story of a Teddy Bear's Adventures in Iraq	Mary Linda Sather	2009	9781592982837 Beaver's Pond Press	760	Female, White, 6–8	Male, White	Father	Air Force	Sad, crying, physical complaints, scared, worried about DP safety	Talking to adult, finding a way to stay connected, baking and sending favorite treats
Hero Dad	Melinda Hardin) Bryan Langdo)	2010	9780761457138 Marshall Candendish	AD610	Male, unknown, 6–8	Male, unknown	Father	Army	Sad	Finding ways to stay connected, finding positive aspects of DP's job
Love Spots	Karen Panier (Sabrina Brady)	2010	9781936352449 Mirror	620	Male, unknown, 12+	Male, unknown	Father	Unknown	Sad, crying	Using spots on uniform to remind DP of love for MC
Daddy's Boots	Sandra Miller Linhart	2010	9780984512706 LionHeart	600	Male, unknown, 3–5	Male, unknown	Father	Unknown	Scared, worried about DP safety	Learning about that DP will be doing during employment
Don't Forget God Bless Our Troops	Jill Biden (Raul Colon)	2012	9781442457355 Simon & Schuster/Paula Wiseman Books	380	Male, White, 6–8	Male, White	Father	Army	Sad, crying, scared, worried about DP safety	Talking to adult, finding ways to stay connected, drawing pictures, physical activity, praying

Table 2 Continued

Title	Author and (illustrator)	Date	ISBN and Publisher	Lexile	MC, gender, race	DP gender, race	Role of DP	Branch of service	MC response to deployment	MC coping strategies
Lily Hated Goodbyes	Jerilyn Marler (Nathan Stoltenberg)	2012	9781936214785 Quincy Companion Books	680	Female, White, 3–5	Male, White	Father	Navy	Sad, scared, angry, being mean and stubborn	Talking to adult, finding ways to stay connected, drawing pictures, physical activity, keep a memories box for DP's return
Why My Dad? A Story About Military Deployment	Lisa R. Bottorff (Nicolas Peruzzo)	2013	9781612252353 Mirror	540	Male, White, 9–11	Male, White	Father	Unknown	Anger	Talking to a friend
Daddy's Deployed	Bridget Platt (Amy Wolfe)	2013	9780988699816 Daddy's Deployed	670	Female, White, 6–8	Male, White	Father	Air Force	Sad, crying, anxious about reunion	Talking to a caring adult, finding ways to stay connected
Why Is Dad So Mad?	Seth Kastle (Karissa Gonzalez-Othon)	2015	9780692402689 Tall Tale Press	570	Male, unknown, 3–5	Male, White	Father	Unknown	Unsure	Talking to caring adult
What Will I Play While You Are Away?	James R. Thomas	2015	9781507782576 James R. Thomas	710	Male, White, 9–11	Unknown, White	Unknown	Unknown	Not knowing what to do with time	Finding ways to stay connected, physical activity, visiting places in community

Note. MC = main character; DP = deployed character; AD = adult directed.

European American (White) families are the most commonly portrayed, consistent with the fact that 70% of those on active duty and Guard/Reserves identify as White/Caucasian (Clever & Segal, 2013). Less reflective of military demographic information, Black families are represented in two (6.3%) of the books, although 16.9% of the active duty population is Black. This racial discrepancy in published books may not be surprising, as only 3% of all children's books published during the years represented by these statistics focus on Black children (Myers, 2014). One of the 30 books in the study identifies a character as a member of the Army National Guard—the only representative of the Reserves or National Guard, although 33% of service members who are deployed are in the National Guard or Reserves (Committee on the Assessment of the Readjustment Needs of Military Personnel, Veterans, and Their Families, 2013).

Consistent with the research literature that focuses on the emotional responses of children impacted by military deployment (Huebner et al., 2007), internalizing emotions of the child, such as feeling sad, being frightened, crying, and worrying about the safety of the DP, are prominent themes in the stories. Unfortunately, the nuances or complexities of these emotions are not often discussed in the text; rather the emotion is named (e.g., sadness) but further exploration of the emotion is not included. Only two books (6.3%) include examples of an MC's externalizing behaviors, such as being mean and stubborn (e.g., *Lilly Hates Goodbyes*). Four of the books (13.3%) include examples of struggles at home. In *My Mommy Wears Combat Boots*, the MC states, "Sometimes I don't want to be good for Grandma because I feel sad inside" (p. 3). And a few pages later in that book the MC says, "When I am mad, I want to yell, kick or hit something or someone. Like my Grandma or our dog. Mommy said it's OK to be mad, but it's not OK to yell, kick or hit Grandma or the dog" (p. 6). Only one book (3.1%) includes school problems (*Ned and the General*)—a notable contrast to research literature indicating that children commonly experience school-related difficulties following deployment of a loved one (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003).

A valuable benefit found in this sample of books is that they provide a wide range of coping strategies for children. Of those coping strategies, finding ways to stay connected to the DP is the most common. Additionally, talking to an adult, drawing pictures, and engaging in physical activity are commonly noted in the books. In *The Wishing Tree* the MC talks to a caring adult, journals, sends letters, and takes pictures for an album to share with the DP upon his return. Military culture encourages participation in family support meetings, but although military spouses wrote some of the books, only two (6.3%) include attending these support meetings (e.g., *A Year Without Dad*).

Interestingly, three books (9.4%) highlight showing pride in the DP's service. In *Hero Dad* the MC says, "My dad is an American soldier. My dad is a hero, my superhero"

(pp. 18–19). The current intervention literature does not explicitly identify pride in the service of the DP as a source of comfort or way of moving through the deployment, yet three of the books convey the theme of family members being proud of the military member for serving the country and sacrificing family time to protect freedom and help others. In *My Dad's A Hero*, the MC expresses the idea that the DP gives up birthdays and holidays and other fun times with family to help those in need, which makes the DP a hero.

We were surprised that only one book (3.1%) addresses reintegration with the DP; none of the books show multiple deployments or the death or permanent injury of the DP. Postdeployment is often complex, particularly dependent on the experiences and well-being of the DP during his or her time away from the family (Meadows, Tanielian, & Karney, 2016). These gaps in the available literature provide opportunities for authors and publishers to address the important concerns families face when the DP returns home, especially if she or he returns with an injury or mental health challenges. It is understandable why books would not address the death of the DP if the authors' intention is to inspire hopefulness for a safe and happy reunion, particularly for young children.

This review of children's books that portray the military deployment of a family member reveals that the identified books address some, but not all, of the important aspects of the deployment process. Several coping strategies are presented in this sample of books, the most prominent being ways to stay connected with the DP and to recognize emotional responses to the deployment. For example, in *Daddy's Deployment* the MC expresses, "I'm scared that my Daddy won't come back home to me" (p. 3). Although these books provide a reasonable portrayal of military families and the deployment experience, several gaps are evident: Percentages of Black families in the military and of those who serve Guard and Reserve units are not accurately represented. Also, some of the complex issues facing military families are not shown in the books, such as externalizing behaviors of children, the realities of military death or injury, the likelihood of multiple deployments, and reintegration after deployment.

Limitations

Although the sample size was rather small, the 30 selected books represent a thorough, focused, time-intensive search; however, it is possible that not all available books were identified and included. Due to the nature of each book, some aspects (e.g., race/ethnicity, feelings) were not easily coded or categorized. The results are limited only to this sample of books and are not generalizable to other books about military deployment, which is expected. As with any type of qualitative research, researcher perceptions and skills may inadvertently influence findings.

Implications for Future Research

This study's sample was limited to picture books and early chapter books. More advanced chapter books with higher Lexile scores and many nonfiction books could be

studied for their usefulness, particularly in selecting the kind of book that best matches the needs of various groups of children (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity). Future research could also evaluate the effectiveness of bibliotherapy with children coping with a family member's deployment, specifically using the books identified in this study. Researchers could assess children's needs and then observe their response to these books. This research could identify the specific aspects of the book and the process of bibliotherapy that provides distinct benefits.

Pride for the military member's service is present in several of this study's books, but not mentioned in the research literature as a way to address the emotional challenges of having a deployed parent. Future research might examine whether expressing pride and discussing the purpose of the military service contributes to the well-being of military children and thus should be part of a package of effective coping strategies. Similarly, staying connected with the DP is frequently a core aspect of the coping strategies identified in the books, which may be intended to show children that their relationship with the DP continues even when the DP is away from the family. Future research could explore effective ways of maintaining or enriching the long-distance relationship. Finally, process and outcome research could identify if and how bibliotherapy is an effective intervention or support strategy specifically for military families and which aspects of the intervention are most likely to contribute to positive outcomes.

Implications for Practice

By using books about deployment in military families, parents, caregivers, and mental health providers can offer children a forum for sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences that closely align with what is likely to be familiar (Watanabe & Jensen, 2000). Parents and other adults who read stories about deployment may begin a safe dialogue with children that explores possible feelings, challenges, and coping strategies. Also, the adult and child may collaboratively develop helpful coping strategies that are modeled in the story. These books can provide a way for caregivers to prepare children for the next steps in the deployment cycle by anticipating issues that may arise and practicing potential coping skills.

The results of this study show an obvious need for additional books for this audience that include ethnically diverse characters and settings, and those that involve Air Force, Army National Guard, and Reserve military personnel. Families from the Guard or Reserves may have different challenges than those of active duty families because many of them are not embedded in a military community that offers multiple forms of family support and the inherent culture of military service (Clever & Segal, 2013; Cole, 2014). These personnel and their families, whose unit affiliation may be limited or nonexistent, tend to receive limited community support, and many suffer from feelings of isolation (Johnson et al., 2007).

Conclusion

This study extracted descriptive information and analyzed content in 30 children's books related to military deployment, using a coding instrument developed for these purposes. Additionally, the books' content was compared to researched information about dependents and loved ones of DPs. The books were not as racially diverse as the military population; they underrepresented Black families in the military.

The most prevalent response portrayed to the deployment of a loved one was sadness, represented in 64% of the books. The most prevalent coping strategy described in 67% of the stories was keeping the main character connected with the deployed individual. A surprising finding was that pride in the deployed person's military service was described as a coping strategy in some of the books, although this strategy was not described in the research literature. Additionally, all phases of deployment were described except for reintegration, a major gap in portraying the deployment experience.

These results provide information for mental health service providers, parents, educators, and others to help them select books that can be integrated into their therapeutic work with children who are experiencing the deployment of a family member. Appropriate books may be used individually with a student or read aloud to a small group to create opportunities to discuss coping strategies and reduce feelings of isolation (e.g., no one knows what I'm facing and how I feel). The books could also be read to an entire class to help other students understand the challenges a classmate may be experiencing, helping to foster empathy in a supportive environment. As bibliotherapy effectively supports children facing a variety of situations, including anxiety and depression (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993; Rapee et al., 2006), this strategy will likely support children experiencing a loved one's deployment.

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Appendix
Coding Instrument for Military Deployment in a Family:
Children's Literature as a Basis for Counseling Support
By Aimee Tubbs

Book Information

Title:

Author:

Illustrator:

Year:

Number of pages:

Picture book or chapter book:

Reading/Lexile level:

Demographics/Characteristics of Main Character (MC) and Deployed Person (DP)

Are the characters human or animal?

- 0 = animal
- 1 = human

What type of book?

- 0 = fiction
- 1 = nonfiction

What is the approximate age of the MC?

- 0 = 3–5 years old
- 1 = 6–8 years old
- 2 = 9–11 years old
- 3 = 12 years and older

What is the gender of the MC?

- 0 = male
- 1 = female

What is the gender of the DP?

- 0 = male
- 1 = female

Appendix Continued

What is the race/ethnicity of the MC?

- 0 = unknown
- 1 = White
- 2 = Hispanic
- 3 = Black
- 4 = Asian, Pacific Islander
- 5 = Native American
- 6 = other
- 7 = mixed group

What is the race/ethnicity of the DP?

- 0 = unknown
- 1 = White
- 2 = Hispanic
- 3 = Black
- 4 = Asian, Pacific Islander
- 5 = Native American
- 6 = other
- 7 = mixed group

What is the length of the deployment?

- 0 = unknown
- 1 = 6 months or less
- 2 = 7–12 months
- 3 = 13 months or more

What is the phase of deployment addressed in the book? (Book may have more than one code.)

- 0 = notification/predeployment
- 1 = departure
- 2 = beginning of deployment
- 3 = middle of deployment

Appendix Continued

- 4 = end of deployment
- 5 = reunion
- 6 = reintegration
- 7 = unknown

What is the location of the deployment?

- 0 = unknown
- 1 = inside the United States, non–war zone
- 2 = outside the United States, non–war zone
- 3 = outside the United States, war zone

What is the branch of service of the DP?

- 0 = Unknown
- 1 = Army
- 2 = Air Force
- 3 = Navy
- 4 = Marines
- 5 = Coast Guard
- 6 = Air National Guard
- 7 = Army National Guard
- 8 = Navy Reserve
- 9 = Air Reserve
- 10 = Army Reserve

Are there other children involved in the story besides the MC?

- 0 = no
- 1 = yes

Are there any other adults involved in the story besides the DP?

- 0 = no
- 1 = yes

Appendix Continued

What is the relationship of the other adults involved to the MC?

- 0 = unknown
- 1 = mother
- 2 = father
- 3 = grandparent
- 4 = teacher
- 5 = other school person
- 6 = aunt or uncle
- 7 = neighbor
- 8 = other adult

Issues Related to Deployment

What are the symptoms/consequences of the deployment experienced by the MC?

- 0 = sadness
- 1 = crying
- 2 = fighting at home
- 3 = fighting at school
- 4 = problems with schoolwork
- 5 = physical ailments (e.g., stomachache, headache)
- 6 = feeling unsure of how to feel (ambivalent)
- 7 = scared
- 8 = worried about safety of DP
- 9 = other (please explain)

What are the symptoms/consequences of the deployment experienced by the DP?

If applicable, describe who the DP is and how he or she responds to the deployment's effects on the MC.

Strategies for Dealing with Deployment Used by MC

- 0 = talking to a caring adult
- 1 = journaling
- 2 = finding ways to stay in touch with deployed parent

Appendix Continued

- 3 = drawing pictures

- 4 = physical activity

- 5 = reading a book

- 6 = other (please describe)

Problem Resolution or Coping Mechanisms

Was the problem/situation brought to a resolution?

- 0 = no

- 1 = yes

If not brought to resolution, describe how the situation/problem is managed.

If brought to resolution, describe how the situation was resolved.