

# STUDENT SUPPORT DURING PARENTAL DEPLOYMENT

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## Abstract

Over 1000 Townsville based members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) were deployed on an eight month military operation to Afghanistan from August 2011 until May 2012. A similar scenario occurred many times in the Townsville community between 1999 and 2013 as members of the ADF have been deployed repeatedly to East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. A military deployment presents major life changes for ADF members and their families. Families of ADF members learn to cope not only with having their loved one away on a dangerous operation but also with the additional pressures associated with having one less adult living in the family home. Children in the family are required to adjust to changes in family structure and routines, and often take on additional individual responsibilities. It is not uncommon for students to express their reactions to these changes through behavioural changes at school. Academic progress, classroom and playground behaviour may be adversely affected by children's reactions to family stress. Defence School Transition Aides (DSTAs) assist children and spouses of ADF members to develop positive coping strategies and build resilience to family changes associated with a parental deployment to a war zone. They are employed in over 100 Australian schools and offer a comprehensive program of support to students from ADF families in the school setting. During the 2011-12 deployment the DSTAs in Townsville articulated their work practice into a comprehensive model to enhance peer support networks for students and parents, facilitate communication between the family and school, promote whole school awareness of family contribution to military operational success as well as provide and facilitate individual student and parent support. This practice model has potential applications for a diverse range of families that also experience parental absence for varying periods of time. The identification of key times of potential stress for students and the application of well targeted strategies can assist to alleviate some of the pressures associated with family and individual child stress responses exacerbated by periodic parental absence and other family disruptions.

## Introduction

Australian Defence Force (ADF) members have been continually serving in peace-keeping and war zones for over a decade. Operational tasks, as directed by the government of the day, determine the roles played by members of the ADF. Since 1999 the Australian Government has committed ADF members to join international forces in peace keeping and combat roles in Timor Leste, Iraq and Afghanistan. The average duration of military deployments is between six and eight months. Predeployment training in the six months prior to deployment also places weighty pressures on the time and resources of ADF members. ADF members are usually granted a period of several weeks leave on returning home from a deployment. The pressures associated with a military deployment can be felt keenly by the ADF member's family.

Students often require additional support during a parental deployment to a war zone. In a review of literature from fields related to child well being during a deployment, Tunac de Pedro et al. (2011) identified a large gap in research relating to the educational needs of children during this time. One

recommendation from this study was for research to gather evidence of how schools have successfully adapted to support the needs of children from military families during parental deployment. Another American study (Barker & Berry, 2009) recommended the collection of data to measure the maintenance of academic grades and regular school attendance for school aged children during parental deployment. After more than a decade of international conflict in the Middle East, many Australian schools that educate students from ADF families have adapted to support the needs of these students, however little is documented about the programs that are working effectively.

Defence School Transition Aides (DSTAs) are employed in over 100 Australian schools to support children from ADF families. The program was introduced into schools in major ADF centres in 2001 to assist children to manage adjustments to the ADF family lifestyle. The program was established as a partnership between the Department of Defence, schools and state education systems and employs aides in primary and secondary schools that enrol considerable numbers of children from ADF families. DSTAs are school employees who work closely with the families of ADF members in their day-to-day work. Funding for wages and resources, professional development and networking opportunities to support the program are provided through the Department of Defence. This program was initially introduced to assist students to transition in and out of schools smoothly. However, in areas of high deployment, including Townsville, support during parental absence from home has also become a strong focus of the program. Survey evaluations showed that the DSTA program was valued highly by ADF families and schools (DCO, 2011).

DSTAs have developed a range of pro-active and responsive strategies to support students and spouses from ADF families during a deployment. As a major military centre, students from ADF families feature in large numbers in many Townsville schools. The effects of a deployment are felt keenly in schools that have subsequently developed a range of support structures over many years. Schools have been assisted greatly in this endeavour by the introduction of the DSTA program. DSTAs work closely with the school administration and the Defence Community Organisation (DCO) to continually refine their practice to optimise the level of support available to the families of ADF members and school staff during a major deployment. Due to the close proximity of Townsville schools, DSTAs are able to meet regularly for networking and sharing. This has assisted the Townsville DSTA network to develop a comprehensive body of shared practice wisdom.

Townsville based DSTAs have developed a model to guide their professional practice during major ADF deployments. The model was developed by reflecting on their group experience of addressing the needs of students and families during previous deployments. The model has four key dimensions: enhancing peer support networks; facilitating communication between schools, families and the ADF; promoting whole school awareness of individual family member contributions to the ADF's mission; and facilitation of individual support.

## Literature review

Children's educational progress can be disrupted by a parent's military service. The teachers of students from ADF members are often aware of changes in their student's academic performance and social functioning when they have a parent away on a military deployment. American research conducted over the past decade has verified these observations (Leuscher, 2012). However, there have been limited research findings to assist teachers to maximise student educational success during this period. Many teachers and whole school communities have adapted to the contingencies of military deployment by developing a range of support structures but they have not been widely shared amongst the education community.

Family transitions associated with parental deployment have been shown to potentially affect student performance in the school setting. Student academic achievement in primary and middle school years in two states of America was demonstrated to be negatively affected by parental deployment (Leuscher, 2012). A six-year study of American Defense families compared the national testing data of students from families who had experienced 19 months or more of deployment to those who had had shorter or no deployments. "There is a modest, consistent, negative relationship between the cumulative months deployed and academic outcomes across the two states and the subjects examined" (Leuscher, 2012, p16). These findings were consistent across all subjects and across two different states. These results were not influenced by the rank or gender of the deployed parent or gender of the child. A similar comparison of results for senior school students did not reveal significant differences in academic results (Leuscher, 2012). Counsellors interviewed for the study contributed the findings to lack of student engagement with homework and school activities and the influence of struggles faced by the at home parent (Leuscher, 2012). Leuscher (2012) recommended the availability of more in-school support services for students and more information for schools about military provided services available to parents.

Family health during the ADF's military involvement in East Timor was shown to be enhanced by high levels of support from extended family members, the Defence community and the wider community (McGuire et al., 2012). The Timor Leste Family Impact Study (2012) surveyed 1332 partners of ADF members and 2854 ADF members who had experienced a deployment to Timor Leste. ADF members and their spouses were asked to self-report on a number of family health indicators concerning physical health, mental health, relationship quality, family functioning and intimate partner violence. The study found that the physical, mental and relationship health of the ADF families is comparable to a control group that had not experienced a deployment. Similarly the behavioural and emotional health of children of the deployed ADF members was comparable to the control group. The study reports increased resilience amongst spouses with repeated deployments however this was not reflected in their children who began to show signs of decreased positive coping with more deployments (McGuire et al., 2012). Multiple deployments, member problems and poor parental health presented as risk factors for children's well-being and these risk factors were evident from the second deployment onwards. This is an important finding for ADF families as members are often required to undergo several deployments during their career. Poorer outcomes for children were reported when the whole family was found to struggle with the deployment.

Adolescent focus group interviews revealed some common emotional themes pertinent to their age group in American research (Huebner, Mancini, Bowen & Orthner, 2007). Focus group interviews enabled teenagers to discuss their personal experiences of a parental deployment. Fourteen focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 107 adolescents (Huebner et al., 2007). Each interview group contained both boys and girls organised by age into younger and older adolescents. The questions were framed to investigate themes around the theoretical framework of ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss refers to situations when a significant person is physically absent but psychologically present or alternatively physically present but psychologically absent. The theory suggests that uncertainty resulting from ambiguous loss may present as an obstacle to healthy development. The research questions were related to the themes of uncertainty, loss, resilience and adjustment. The adolescents reported experiencing stress related to additional responsibilities placed on them at home during a deployment such as sibling child minding and household tasks. They consistently reported that the reunion phase of a deployment after the deployed parent's return as the most difficult aspect of the whole deployment. They described a lot of family conflict around the readjustment required as the returned parent once again became a physically present member of the family unit. The teenagers involved in focus group studies reported that they often felt that their increased contribution to the family unit and their maturity displayed during the deployment went unnoticed by the returning parent and conflict potentially resulted, throwing the family into disarray (Huebner et al., 2007; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset & Blum, 2009). Family conflict arising during any stage of the deployment can potentially impact on the stability of the whole family unit, including on the work performance of the deployed military member (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011).

## Project objectives and implementation

DSTAs in Townsville met at the beginning of 2011 to pool their practice knowledge and experience with regards to supporting students during a parental deployment. The findings were used to articulate a holistic model of support to be used for an upcoming major deployment of Townsville troops. This model was implemented during the period of an ADF deployment to Afghanistan involving over 1000 Townsville based ADF members for a period of eight months from August 2011 to May 2012. DSTAs were aware from previous deployment experiences that parental absence can influence student behaviour and academic progress. They described a proactive and responsive model of support that would provide protective factors and enhanced levels of support to students and their families during the upcoming deployment.

The DSTAs were experienced in supporting students from ADF families from previous deployments. The workshop goals were to draw on their practice experience to articulate a model of best practice for the upcoming deployment. The planning workshop was facilitated by the Regional Education Liaison Officer (REDLO) from the Defence Community Organisation (DCO). A world café workshop format (Brown, Isaacs, Margulies & Warhafflec 1999) was used to tap into their shared knowledge and understanding. A key component of the World Café methodology is to identify a key strategic question to foster dialogue leading to collective insight around real life challenges (Brown et al., 1999). DSTAs met in groups of six to consider the overarching question ‘What is important to an ADF family at school during a deployment?’ Each small group discussed the question in depth and wrote their thoughts and ideas on butcher’s paper. After a lengthy period of sharing and discussion each group identified three key insights arising from their discussions. Findings from each group were collated on a white board for whole group consideration and reflection. Facilitated whole group discussion led to the identification of two major overarching dimensions that encapsulated the essence and focus of DSTA work during a deployment: the facilitation of trusting relationships between schools and families; and the enhancement of supportive relationships for students both within the family and within the school community.

To further explore the role of the DSTAs in supporting students during parental deployment, each DSTA later documented the range of targeted activities that had been undertaken in their school during previous deployments. These descriptions were collated into a magazine that was made available to each school in the program. The magazine contributions were used as data to further examine the role of DSTAs during a military deployment.

Using grounded theory methods the documented descriptions of deployment related activities were coded; initial codes and focussed codes facilitated the analysis for arising themes (Charmaz, 2006; Birks & Mills, 2011). The analysis resulted in the recognition of four major dimensions describing the work of DSTAs during an ADF deployment: enhancement of peer support networks; facilitation of communication between school, family and defence; promotion of whole school awareness of family contribution to the ADF; and the facilitation of individual support.

## Findings

Each DSTA established a program to meet the unique requirements of his or her school community during the 2011-2 military deployment. A number of common practices such as lunch time activities

and regular parent social morning teas were already in place across most schools. They were enhanced by unique activities developed in individual schools to meet particular school and student needs.

## Dimension 1: Enhance peer support networks

Schools are in a position to foster the development of informal networks amongst members of the school community (Bowen & Martin, 1998). Informal networks of support during deployments can provide important protective factors for families of ADF members (Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000). Informal networks also provide a foundation for building school capacity for family support (Huebner et. al., 2009). DSTAs put these theoretical perspectives into practice during their day to day work.

Each DSTA has a space available in his or her school where students can gather for informal or planned activities. A range of structured and less structured lunchtime activities allow students time and opportunity to share personal experiences. Students were encouraged to normalise their personal experiences through sharing with others in a similar situation. Peer support networks developed through informal activities and facilitated group programs.

The five secondary based DSTAs in Townsville developed a program called 'Rollercoaster of Deployment' for secondary students with a deployed parent. Students from several secondary schools gather for a one day workshop to explore, share and normalise their experiences during a parental deployment. Program activities were designed to assist students to identify their own unique strengths and demonstrate how to use them to develop coping strategies. Positive coping strategies were explored and planned for. Group activities encouraged students to articulate their needs and problem solve potential solutions. Particular attention was given to brainstorming ways of meeting their own needs whilst also supporting the family unit. The reunion phase of the deployment, commonly a challenging time for adolescents and their returning parent was explored in depth with an emphasis on considering the recent experiences and perspectives of all family members. Activities encouraged students to develop an understanding of their own communication and conflict style while problem solving to consider the needs of all family members.

DSTAs endeavoured to engage the spouses of ADF members during a deployment by offering regular activities such as morning teas and support groups with guest speakers. These gatherings provided an opportunity for spouses of ADF members to share experiences, offer each other helpful suggestions and develop support networks. Many of these groups became sites of great energy and support for many of the participating spouses. DSTAs were proactive in encouraging spouses of ADF members to participate in established parent volunteer programs already operating within the school. Involvement in activities such as classroom support and working in the tuckshop provided social contact for those involved as well as making a valuable contribution to the school.

## Dimension 2: Facilitate communication between school, family and defence

Strengthening the relationship between the school and family can produce beneficial outcomes for student academic engagement (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). DSTAs are often instrumental in assisting parents to become engaged with the school and feel comfortable to visit the school and speak to staff members. DSTAs also play a key role in assisting teachers to become aware of contextual factors that may influence a student's academic progress or behaviour. These practices can create a sense of trust and understanding between ADF families and teachers.

DSTAs facilitated a range of creative communication processes between individual students and their parents, deployed ADF units and the whole school community, and classroom communities with key ADF members. The nature of the communication was planned to be emotionally uplifting as well as educationally relevant and was reportedly very beneficial for the deployed ADF members as well as the students. Increased age based appropriate knowledge of many of the roles played by ADF members and the conditions they encounter on deployment promoted a sense of pride, admiration and caring amongst the students involved.

Teachers of students from ADF families often initiated a communication trail between deployed parents of students and the whole class. Email or postal mail was used to facilitate messages of support from the students to the ADF members and valuable educational material from the deployed ADF members back to the class. This provided an opportunity for students to learn about the geography, history and social aspects of another country substantiated by real life experiences and photographs, as well as offering students an opportunity to gain some insight into the conditions of service and personal characteristics of ADF members undergoing historically significant and often personally hazardous tasks in service to their country.

DSTAs captured important moments for students at school in photographs. Students receiving a school award or engaging in school activities were amongst the day to day pleasures missed by absent parents. Receiving a photographic record of events enabled deployed parents to share, albeit at a distance, in the everyday achievements of their children. Such activities provided an opportunity for children to record their day to day school experiences in a journal to be shared with the deployed parent on return. This provided a source of pride and discovery for both the parent and their child as they made up for lost time.

DSTAs have an awareness of the pressures on the at home parent during a deployment. Fulfilling the role of two parents can be exhausting. Often children will also need additional time and support as they cope with the absence of their deployed parent. DSTAs encouraged recognition of the needs and work of the at-home parent, providing opportunities for students to make special gifts and write messages to take home throughout the deployment. Parents were encouraged through school newsletters to visit and engage with the school, keeping the school informed of their family situation.

DSTAs are uniquely placed, as a member of their school staff, to advocate within the school for the needs of students and ADF families. They are in a position to be able to develop positive and supportive relationships with the families of ADF members and often learn to understand the family situations of many of the students. They become a conduit for facilitating constructive school and family communication. They will usually have more discretionary time than teachers to spend on building positive and supportive relationships with parents. This can enable them to gain insight into the particular pressures on some families. Teachers are not always in the position of having specific contextual information about factors that are influencing the behaviour of children in their classes. With specific contextual understanding DSTAs are often able to assist teachers to recognise the source of student behavioural changes and develop strategies to support students through difficult times. Focussing on the needs of an individual student in a time of difficulty will often provide on the job professional development for teachers enabling them with skills and understanding for present and future use.

DSTAs can be of great support to their school administration team. They are available to brief the administration staff on contextual factors influencing parent and student perspectives. Through continuous professional discussions the DSTAs educate the administration team on specific cultural aspects of the ADF community. This professional knowledge in the school leadership teams can inform school policies and practices that will assist future students and families to assimilate into the whole school community. Enhanced knowledge and experience in the school leadership can over time

be used to educate teachers and other members of the school staff.

### Dimension 3: Promote whole school awareness of family contribution to ADF's mission

DSTAs have an awareness of the demands placed on ADF members including the requirement for them to provide unrestricted service. Through supporting children and parents from ADF families within the school context they provide a valuable contribution to the capability of the ADF. With families well supported, members have greater capacity to focus on their ADF commitments. DSTAs are instrumental in raising whole school awareness of the demands on ADF families and assisting the school community to build their capacity to provide family support.

The contributions of family members to a military deployment were highlighted through whole school activities. The presentation of Defence student medallions, student leadership and friendship awards at school parades and school newsletter items assisted to raise school and community awareness of the contributions of ADF families to the school and general community. Many schools display commemorative items in their school foyer. Teachers were provided with professional development opportunities to develop their awareness of the challenges afforded to families of ADF members by the ongoing transitions associated with the ADF lifestyle. DSTAs represented the needs of individual students during challenging times in a range of school forums.

Student medallions for recognition of children's contributions to a successful deployment are a recent initiative. DSTAs facilitated presentation ceremonies in their schools for students with a deployed parent to receive a medallion in recognition of their personal contribution to the ADF mission. Such events provided an opportunity for the school principal to acknowledge and highlight the important contribution of ADF family members to a successful deployment. A supported and well-functioning family at home provides the ADF member with peace of mind and the support he or she requires to be able to focus on the tasks at hand.

Whole school communities participated in a range of activities that raised awareness of the sacrifices made by ADF members and their families during an operational deployment. Projects such as developing care packages to send to soldiers on deployment, producing items to be sent to children in a war torn country and baking ANZAC biscuits for distribution to veterans engaged many students and staff members who may not have had previous knowledge of the experiences of ADF families.

DSTAs engaged their whole school community in activities related to deployment support. Many schools sent a mascot teddy bear dressed in military uniform on operation with an ADF unit. When an ADF member or military unit agreed to take the school's bear on deployment, it was not uncommon for the bear to be handed over to representatives from the host unit at a whole school parade. Subsequent letters and photos of the bear on military operation were shared with the whole school community during the deployment. Many communications were in a humorous vein that encouraged school support for and knowledge of the operation. On return the bear was returned to the school once again at a whole school parade. The host ADF members involved usually had many tales of the bear's adventures and experiences during the deployment that were enjoyed by the students and staff. Such projects can unify a school behind the ADF families in their school community and provide students and their ADF families with a sense of support from the school community.

Ceremonies for ANZAC day and Remembrance Day often gain additional relevance for a school community when many parents are actively involved in military operations. DSTAs were involved in coordinating ceremonies in their school. They liaised with the local Brigade headquarters to organise local ADF members to actively participate. School parents often attended the parades in uniform.

Townsville students were well represented in the many other anniversary and commemoration ceremonies coordinated by the Townsville branch of the Return Services League (RSL).

Having a DSTA on the school staff sends a message to the school community that ADF families are important members of their school community. Many school communities in Townsville have felt the effects of battle casualties either directly or indirectly. DSTAs have played an important role in supporting students, parents and staff through difficult periods. The school administration staff members have often relied on DSTA knowledge and experience during difficult times.

#### Dimension 4: Facilitate individual support

DSTAs are aware of the importance of encouraging families to seek support early when needed. They have in depth knowledge of the range of services available to families within the school community. They identify when family needs are beyond the school resources and encourage families to seek support through the Defence Community Organisation (DCO). DCO offers a range of services to support families with challenges related to the ADF lifestyle. They make appropriate community based referrals when needed.

Families of ADF members develop resilience to the ADF lifestyle (McGuire et al., 2012). Spouses and children of ADF members develop the skills of independence required to successfully negotiate the challenges involved in routine family mobility and changes in family structures due to parental absence. However even very resilient families can at times be overwhelmed by changes in circumstances and may require additional community support. DSTAs are skilled at identifying when children or spouses of ADF members are likely to benefit from additional personal or community support and make appropriate referrals when required. They are also available to provide additional individual support to students and spouses of ADF members on a short term basis within the school setting. DSTAs work in partnership with teachers and parents to assist individual students to remain actively engaged in their educational program.

## Discussion

Townsville is an operationally focused military area. During times of war or peace, students from ADF families are a prominent presence in many Townsville schools. It is vital that local schools and teachers continue to develop an understanding of the unique challenges faced by families of ADF members and the possible impact on students' educational progress. DSTAs played an important role in raising their school community's awareness of the potential pressures on families of ADF members during an intense period of military deployment and of the need to build school capacity to provide additional support to families of ADF members when needed.

Families of ADF members generally place a high value on the education of their children and have high expectations of schools to accommodate their needs. High rates of mobility and parental absence for training have always been a feature of the ADF lifestyle. However, since 1999, Australia's military involvement in several theatres of international conflict has placed additional stresses on many families of ADF members that have in turn placed pressures on schools. The DSTA program has contributed greatly in assisting schools to adapt to this reality.

DSTAs have an understanding of the unique pressures on families of ADF members. Through



professional development and continuous contact with families of ADF members in their school community they have built up a wealth of professional knowledge and experience. Working with teachers on a daily basis has provided them with an opportunity to understand the pressures and demands of the classroom and school environment and develop a comprehensive skills base to assist students to develop coping strategies and build resilience to their family situation in order to support their educational engagement and achievement.

The experience and practice wisdom of DSTAs in relation to military deployments has been captured in the support framework presented in this paper. Members of the DSTA network in Townsville have pooled their resources in the interests of documenting their experiences over many years of supporting the high operational tempo experienced in the city. Their practice model has enhanced their professional delivery of high standard proactive and responsive support. The development of the model ensures that key aspects of their work are addressed during their day to day business. They enhance peer support networks for students and parents; facilitate constructive communication between schools, families and the ADF; promote whole school understanding of the contributions of ADF families to the success of military operations and facilitate individual support for the families of ADF members if required.

The presented model of support has broader applications than ADF families. It was developed specifically to address the needs of the families of ADF members during times of deployment. However it is also applicable to a diverse range of Australian families who experience parental absence from the family home for varying reasons. Increasingly, centres such as Townsville house many families from the mining industry with fly in, fly out working arrangements. Employment in the mining industry also places additional pressures on the families of miners that are often felt in many Townsville schools. Townsville is a large regional centre housing many state and commonwealth public servants many of whom are engaged in work related travel and the related absence from family.

The implementation of the presented model is very dependent on staffing. The employment of DSTAs in schools is made possible through funding from the Department of Defence. The program enables time to be devoted to supporting the needs of the families of ADF members. While schools develop a range of programs, policies and practices to provide a supportive school environment for all students, the time allocated to the families of ADF members through the DSTA program would not be possible without the employment of a dedicated staff member. The benefits of the program have been continually endorsed DSTA program (DCO, 2011).

The Federal Government has a vested interest in supporting the needs of ADF families. Supporting families of ADF members is recognised by leaders in the Department of Defence as a means of enhancing ADF capability. Therefore the continuation of the DSTA program in some form is likely to continue even with the scaling down of Australia's involvement in current international conflicts. However for a similar model to be implemented to support other deserving groups of families experiencing similar stresses, a practice and funding model would need to be developed. Whether this is a State or Federal Government responsibility is a discussion that is needed by schools and ADF families. Schools attribute increased attendance rates, reduced suspensions and greater tolerance of diversity in the school body to the implementation of the

## **Disclaimer**

This article relates to the author's research towards a Doctor of Education. This doctorate study is approved by the Australian Defence Human Research Ethics Committee (ADHREC), James Cook University, Queensland Education and Catholic Education, North Queensland diocese. The National

Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research has been adhered to in meeting the requirements of these approving bodies. The author is employed by the Department of Defence and in her role as the Regional Education Liaison Officer with Defence Community Organisation (DCO) North Queensland, provides professional support and development opportunities to the Defence School Transition Aide (DSTA) program in North Queensland. This article reflects work undertaken by the author during her employment with DCO. The article reflects the opinions of the author and does not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defence.

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